

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ALFRED HITCHCOCK

OCTOBER 2008

Skin and Bones

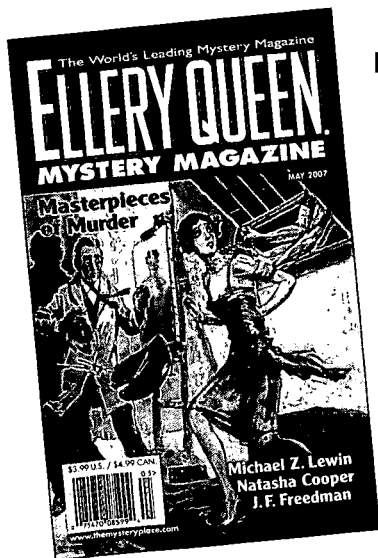
What did the construction of the UN building have to do with the murder of a street kid?

BY DAVID
EDGERLEY
GATES

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

6 Issues, just \$10.97!

Subscribe today and get 6 intriguing mystery magazines delivered to your door at 60% off the regular newsstand price!



Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine leads the genre in critical acclaim with more than 55 nominations and 22 major awards just since 2000!

Every issue delivers suspenseful stories from the honor roll of mystery and crime fiction's great writers PLUS mystery limericks, poems and cartoons, book reviews, and an occasional mystery crossword!

Order Today and Save 60%!

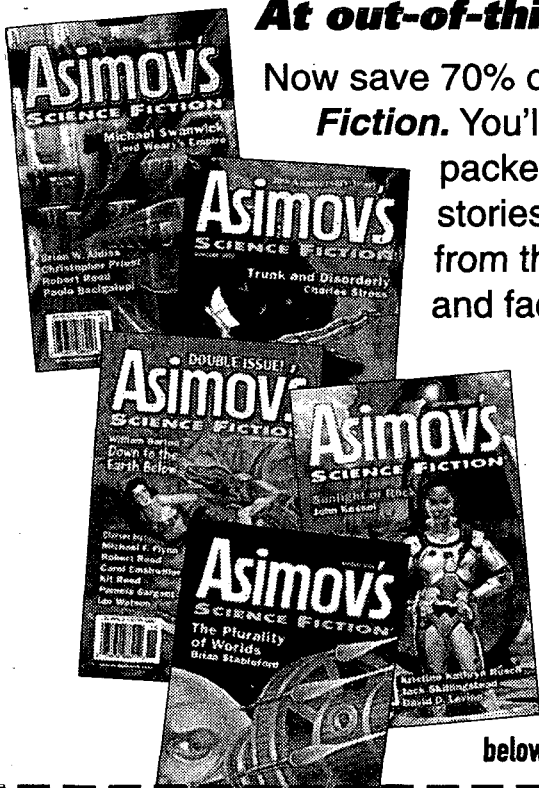
To charge your order to MC or Visa, call

1-800-828-7477

The **SCIENCE FICTION** You Love

At out-of-this-world Savings!

Now save 70% on **Asimov's Science Fiction**. You'll get 5 back issues packed with novellas, short stories, and guest editorials from the best science fiction and fact writers of today.



To order, just fill out the coupon below and mail with your payment today.

DELL MAGAZINES

Suite SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220



YES! Please send me my Asimov's Science Fiction Value Pack. I get 4 back issues for just \$6.95 plus \$2 shipping and handling (\$8.95 per pack, U.S. funds). My payment of \$_____ is enclosed. (IAPK05)

Name: _____
(Please print)

Address: _____

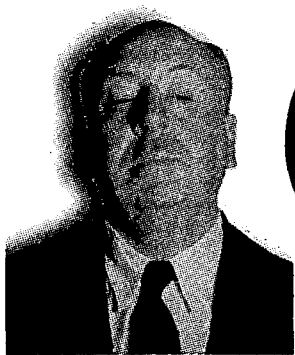
City: _____

State: _____ ZIP: _____

Please make checks payable to Dell Magazines Direct. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Add \$4 additional shipping and handling for delivery outside the U.S.A. Offer expires 9/30/09.

28C-NN5VL1

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



C CONTENTS

October 2008

Cover by Michael Gibbs

FICTION

- 4 THE STOLEN VENUS by Darrell Schweitzer
- 18 SKIN AND BONES by David Edgerley Gates
- 55 THE FOUR CASTLES by Terence Faherty
- 74 CATCH YOUR DEATH by D. A. McGuire
- 106 THE QUICK BROWN FOX by Robert S. Levinson

MYSTERY CLASSIC

- 125 THE BLUE SEQUIN by R. Austin Freeman

DEPARTMENTS

- 3 EDITOR'S NOTES
- 69 THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER by Willie Rose
- 70 BOOKED & PRINTED by Robert C. Hahn
- 100 SOLUTION to the September Dying Words
- 101 MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH
- 102 REEL CRIME by J. Rentilly
- 140 THE STORY THAT WON
- 141 THE LINEUP

Visit us online at www.TheMysteryPlace.com!

Indicia on page 143

EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

THE POST-AWARDS ISSUE

As we write, we have just returned to our desks from the annual Malice Domestic Convention in Arlington, VA, and the Edgar Awards ceremony in New York City. At Malice this year, AHMM and our sister publication, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, were honored by the organizers with the Poirot Award, for which we are deeply grateful. As always, the Edgars brought out the luminaries of the field, and we extend warm congratulations to all the finalists and winners.

Our cover story this month features the return of David Edgerley Gates's 1940's West Side wise guy Mickey Counihan, last seen in our March 2008 issue. In "Skin and Bones," Mickey's attempt to do a favor for a friend leads him into unexpectedly deep waters of international politics and arms dealing. This exciting tale climaxes at the site of the soon-to-be-constructed United Nations building.

Also returning to our pages this month is D. A. McGuire's teen sleuth Herbie Sawyer. In "Catch Your Death," McGuire confronts Herbie with some typical—and some not-so-typical—adolescent challenges. He proves himself once again a remarkably astute young man.

We are delighted to welcome Darrell Schweitzer to our pages this month. His story "The Stolen Venus" casts the Roman historian and statesman Pliny (the Younger) in the detective's role as he investigates activities in the Roman province of Bithynia in order to report to the Emperor Trajan. And making only his second appearance in AHMM is Terrence Faherty, last seen in the November 2007 issue. He returns with a tale of an idyllic Scottish vacation gone wrong.

Our Mystery Classic this month is R. Austin Freeman's "The Blue Sequin," and our regular columns and features round out the issue.

Finally, we are delighted to welcome Robert S. Levinson back to our pages with his timely tale "The Quick Brown Fox." Timely because, while many of our stories are scheduled months in advance, sometimes a submission arrives just in time to balance out the issue we're working on. Such was the case here and we were pleased to be able to slot this one in with no delay. (Bob, sorry we couldn't return it for further consideration as you requested, but don't worry—it's a terrific story.)

THE STOLEN VENUS

FROM THE PREVIOUSLY
UNPUBLISHED CORRESPONDENCE
OF THE YOUNGER PLINY

DARRELL SCHWEITZER

1. Pliny to the Emperor Trajan

You have asked me, sir, to keep you informed of my progress through the province of Bithynia as I might write to a friend, rather than merely as an official might report to his emperor, and so I shall be, as requested, fulsome in the details.

Having concluded our business in Heracleia Pontica, my party has turned inland, toward Claudiopolis; where there is much to occupy my attention: accounts in arrears and possible civil disturbances.

Unfavorable winds prevent us from sailing up the local river (Sangarius), and so we proceed over rough roads by carriage. The heat oppresses us. My assistant, Servilius Pudens, became ill for a time, but my Greek physician, Arpocras, yet again proved himself invaluable. . . .

2. Trajan to Pliny

Your own well-being, my dear Pliny, and that of your party remain foremost in my thoughts. I am glad that the invaluable Arpocras has cured Pudens of his illness. You are wise to adapt your travel to local conditions. Report to me in detail what you find in Claudiopolis, as the disturbances there have the potential of creating a greater danger.

3. Pliny to Trajan

. . . It begins with two crows.

I call them my two crows, from the way they squawk at one another. Servilius Pudens and Arpocras (whose name means "Crow" in Greek, I remind myself) remain the best of friends, despite their constant arguments about anything and everything. At times this even resembles genuine philosophical debate, and

might occasionally produce a flash of wisdom, like a spark from an anvil.

As we three lay back in our carriage, bumping over the hot, dusty roads, the subject of current contention was whether or not each of us resembles, either in his name or person, some kind of animal. Indeed, Arpocras, the Crow, is a thin, beak-nosed man whose hair was once dark, while Pudens, so said the Greek in a jesting mood, more resembles a *walrus*, a fabulous, flabby beast reputed to inhabit northern seas, which is ridiculous, and maybe even insulting, as Pudens more resembles a somewhat overfed but still quite formidable bull.

I might have put a stop to this, but I dozed off instead, and when I awoke the conversation had somehow turned to theology.

"Are you saying, then, Greek—" Pudens put a sneer into that word, which he would not have done if they were not friends. "—that the forms of the gods and goddesses do not matter, and Mars does not look like a warrior and Venus does not look like, well, Venus?"

"I suggest," said Arpocras slowly, as if explaining something to a dull-witted schoolboy, "that the true forms of the gods are ineffable, incomprehensible, not something that can be imitated by human art. Therefore, when the sculptor carves a statue of Venus, the goddess may inspire him, but the result exists for the benefit of mankind, as a focus of devotion, but not as a literal representation."

Pudens rummaged about and produced an apple and a small knife. He cut a slice out of the apple, ate it, then contemplated the apple. "You're saying then that if I carve this apple into a face and call it a goddess, it's just as valid as a statue by Phidias?"

The Greek snatched the apple and the knife before the astonished Pudens could react, cut the apple in half, then impaled both pieces on the blade and handed the result back to him.

"Theoretically, yes, but somehow I doubt that you are inspired by any other than the goddess of food. Now, finish your deity."

Pudens ate the apple.

This might have seemed too trivial an incident to report, sir, but it proved prophetic in more ways than one. Indeed, the question of the forms that divinity might take was much on my mind in the next couple of days.

We reached Claudiopolis toward evening, and were of course admitted immediately, despite which we were unable to make our way through the crowded streets because a religious festival was in progress. The city, despite its name, despite its refounding as a

colony in the time of the deified Claudius, is of a distinctly *Oriental* character, with many remnants of the culture and way of life that were in place before even the Greeks arrived.

This was made all the more apparent when we came to the intersection of the two main streets of the city and, despite our imperial banners, squadron of cavalry, and large caravan of assistants, staff, and baggage, we had to pause to let the goddess Venus pass by. Goddesses outrank imperial envoys in most parts of the world, it would seem.

It was an amazing sight, this festival, which isn't even on our Roman calendar. It was something purely local, a gaudy affair with naked youths and maidens strewing flowers along the way, followed by musicians thundering on drums and blasting with trumpets and rattling cymbals; then came a mass of garlanded priestesses and finally a great, gilded car pulled by white oxen, in which rode the goddess herself in the form of an enormous marble image, far taller than a man, in the most barbarous aspect imaginable: a face like a harsh mask, with wide, blank eyes, but the body covered with hundreds of breasts, like udders, and the arms outstretched, as if to bestow blessings or (so it occurred to me) to throttle somebody.

"Love in Claudiopolis must be a very peculiar business," said Pudens as the thing passed.

"Keep your voice down," snapped Arpocras, "lest someone hear you blaspheme."

Pudens put his hand to his ear and shouted, "What?" Indeed it was hard to hear anything over the noise of the crowd, which was quite worked into a frenzy at this point. But if a riot were about to break out, it was clearly prevented by the presence of my troop of soldiers, and by the city watch and city officials, who came to meet us once the procession had passed.

Eventually we found ourselves at the house of L. Licinius Aper, a leading citizen of the town, who had intrigued against several rivals (so I gathered later) for the privilege of hosting us.

I braced myself for what was to follow. It is a ritual that recurs every place I visit, some rich person like this Aper pushing himself to the forefront to introduce himself, shower me with every flattery, boast about his own importance, protest his loyalty to Rome, etc., etc.

They always do this because they want something. Somehow it is always the rich and powerful who are never satisfied.

I of course must be impartial, and deal with local persons of importance, keeping my impressions (at least initially) to myself, but I must admit that I took an almost immediate dislike to L.

Licinius Aper. He was a red-faced, balding man a little younger than me, about fifty perhaps, but if anyone resembled the fabled walrus it was he, having grown so fat with indulgence that, quite unlike Servilius Pudens, he could hardly bear his own weight. A quartet of burly slaves hauled him about in a chair most of the time.

Nevertheless, he was animated, sputtering, a ceaseless fount of information about the town and its people and their affairs. It is not actually a proverb, but should be, that *a man who cannot stop talking may eventually say something useful*.

When he tried to dismiss Arpocras with a wave of his hand, the Greek stood firm, and so did I, and Licinius Aper, realizing his blunder, graciously invited the three of us to bathe and dine with him.

He gave us a tour of the house, making sure that we noticed the images of all the deified emperors among his household gods, and that his statues of the gods and goddesses were of the conventional sort. No thousand-breasted Venuses here.

"I hear they have something like that down in Ephesus," said Servilius Pudens, "only they call it Diana."

"That is exactly my point, my dear fellow," said Licinius Aper, placing his hand on Pudens's shoulder with an audible thump and perhaps too much familiarity; though to be fair, he was actually *walking* then and may have needed to lean on Pudens for support.

"It is?"

"Yes. The natives apply the names of our divinities to theirs, absurd as they might be, and that raises the question of whether they can really be considered divine at all, or just the fevered imaginings of barbarians."

Arpocras coughed, as if to say he did not like where this conversation was going, but Pudens merely said, "Oh really? My friend and I were discussing something very similar this afternoon."

"Indeed?" said Licinius Aper. "Tell me about it."

Tell him he did, and the loquacious Aper dragged on this discussion for hours, through our bath, well into the dinner that followed, only interrupted by vulgar displays of lewd dancers and mimes and acrobats. There was no doubt that our host was going all-out to impress, though I couldn't help but think of the ridiculous freedman in the *Satyricon* of Petronius, written in the time of Nero yet as applicable to the present circumstances. But Licinius Aper was a Roman, a true son of the Tiber and the Seven Hills, as he had not failed to impress upon us, as he continued to impress . . . and if I may add a further new proverb to my short collection, let me say that *the man who strives so hard to impress may ultimately give an impression other than the one he intended*.

More than once Pudens shot me a glance as if to say how he

suffered for the good of Rome, doing his duty, putting up with all this. Arpocras gazed into space, stonily, but remained, I am sure, completely alert. The oddest thing about the whole evening was that at times you might think that Pudens was the object of our host's hospitality, and I, the *legatus propraetore consulari potestate* was almost forgotten. But I bided my time, as did Arpocras, waiting for Licinius Aper to get to the point.

He finally did.

The dancers and mimes were long gone. The dinner had proceeded, literally from eggs to apples, and as we lingered into the late hours over dessert, our host said suddenly, "The men of Juliopolis are my enemies."

I already knew of the rivalry between the two cities, a common enough phenomenon between Greek cities in the East. With the might of Rome to prevent them from actually going to war, they often expressed their enmity in sporting competitions, street riots, and more often than not in ridiculous vanities, each striving to build the grander theater or aqueduct or temple, which were often unsound, over budget, and the cause of the very evils which I had come into the province to correct.

I sighed, and thought, *At last*.

I will not repeat everything he said, for even when he was getting to the point, Licinius Aper could be long winded. The gist of it was—as I understood the undertext of his discourse—that certain wealthy men like himself, *Romans*, as he made sure we were all quite clear about, some of whose families had dwelt in the East since the affairs of the region were settled by Pompey over a hundred and fifty years ago, controlled the local economy, the grain markets, the small manufactures, even the religious pilgrimage trade. He being, of course, a *gentleman*, a member of the local senate, did not sully his hands with actual commerce, but worked through agents and freedmen, as did everyone. He and the senators held the city for Rome, and therefore deserved such rewards as they had reaped (although I was determined that there would be a clear accounting during my stay here), etc., etc. But they had incurred the wrath of the men of Juliopolis, their rivals for exactly the *same* avenues of commerce. The god of Juliopolis had an enormous member, Aper told us, snickering like a schoolboy, and was therefore identified with Priapus and the subject of "disgusting" rites.

What precisely did L. Licinius Aper want from me which he was (even yet) not quite willing to state plainly?

It became clear enough: He wanted me to contrive some sort of criminal charge and remove, or even have put to death, one

Clodius Carus, his opposite number in Juliopolis.

"A mere Greek," Aper spat out in genuine repugnance—the first sincere utterance I had heard from him, the rest being like the recital of a bad actor. Arpocras drew breath sharply. Our host had obviously forgotten him entirely.

"Not a Roman at all, despite his Latin name, which he surely stole," Licinius Aper went on, "a wretched provincial scoundrel who desires to destroy my wealth, discredit me in the eyes of the emperor . . . I am certain, sirs, that he means to commit some *outrage* very soon. I thank the gods for your fortunate arrival so that you might thwart his evil schemes. . . ."

Eventually we escaped Aper's hospitality and retired.

"But of course, of course, you have had a long journey," he babbled on and might have spoken volumes more if our own slaves hadn't closed protectively around us to attend to our needs.

I was able to confer briefly with Pudens and Arpocras.

"What do you think?" I said.

Pudens rolled his eyes heavenward as if he were about to faint, then laughed softly.

Arpocras said, "Did you mark how he said 'my enemies' and 'my wealth'?"

"I did. This is some selfish, petty matter, then, not of larger political import—"

"It could be both, sir."

Verily possibly he, too, spoke prophetically.

I had barely gotten to sleep when the cries of the "outrage" were upon us. There was a great commotion outside in the street. Someone was pounding on the front door. Our host's slaves were up and about, and then so were Arpocras, Pudens, and myself. We had barely emerged from our rooms when an obviously aroused and possibly frightened Licinius Aper lumbered upon us, blubbing, wringing his hands.

"It is as I predicted, sirs. I fear that it is. An outrage! A blasphemy! It is the work of my enemy, I am sure, to discredit and destroy our city—"

For the first time he said *our* rather than *my*, as if the catastrophe, for the first time, applied to more than himself.

"What has happened?" Servilius Pudens demanded, speaking for all of us.

"It's so—so—incredible—"

Licinius Aper could have gone on for enough to fill twenty pages without saying anything, if I were to report his speech exactly, so I must condense his matter: It seemed that the goddess

Venus of the thousand breasts, the very one we had let pass in the street upon our entry to the city, had *vanished*.

"But that's absurd," said Arpocras. "Half-ton marble goddesses don't just disappear!"

Aper leaned forward, as if to deliver his lines in a bad stage whisper, "They say that she *walked*. The temple suddenly filled with an unnatural light. She struck down her priestesses and *walked* out of the temple, into the night! The people are terrified, noble sirs, as you can well imagine. For myself, I don't know what to think—"

"But you think it might have something to do with the schemes of your enemy, Clodius Carus," I said, attempting to organize his thoughts.

He stopped, startled, as if the idea had not occurred to him. If so, he was stupider than he looked. If not, his acting was getting better.

"We are men of the world," I said. "We don't really believe that barbarous, provincial marble statues get up and walk, do we?"

"No, but—"

"Then it must be the doings of this Clodius Carus, yes?"

Suddenly Aper's distraught features seemed so much more calm.

"I am relieved that you see that," he said.

But first we had to inspect the scene of the crime, and crime it was too. We all quickly dressed. The centurion of my guards came to report. Accompanied by a troop of soldiers, marching in step, the steady tread of their hobnailed boots imposing some sort of order on the chaotic night, we followed them through the streets of the city. Pudens, Arpocras, and I walked. Licinius Aper rode in his chair.

The streets were filled with disorderly people, who melted away as we approached, or just stood staring, silently, as we passed.

We came to the temple, which was of moderate size, Greek in form, but more ornately decorated in the Oriental style.

As soon as I entered, I saw that a serious crime had indeed been committed. There were three dead women, two on the floor, one lying halfway out onto the steps. Their skulls were crushed. There was blood everywhere. These were the priestesses of this Claudiopolitan Venus, allegedly struck down by their goddess when she deserted the city.

And she had deserted it. The thousand-breasted divinity was distinctly missing from her shrine within. The place was filled with thick, strange-smelling smoke. It was clear enough to me that some kind of oil had been set afire on the floor, but this did not burn down the temple because the building was made entirely of

stone and the oil was swiftly consumed. I held the edge of my toga up over my nose to avoid choking on the fumes, made my way to the back, and examined the hole in the floor, behind the altar, where the divinity had been affixed. It was clear enough to me, and to Arpocras, who stood beside me, that the goddess was shaped out of a single pillar of marble, that she was, when not parading about the city in her gilded car, affixed here like a post, and her walking out of the temple was made all the less plausible by her not having any legs.

"It is shocking! Shocking!" said Licinius Aper when we emerged from the temple. He had just arrived, and had not ventured to climb the temple steps, though he stood supported by two of his muscular slaves. He waved a hand about, indicating a huddle of glum-faced individuals whom I took to be local senators. "It will be the ruin of us all!"

I am not sure if he was performing for me or for his colleagues, but for once he was telling the honest truth. If the goddess were not recovered, it would be the ruin of Claudiopolis, the end of the religious trade, and much else, as the superstitious multitudes fled elsewhere to avoid a place obviously shunned by the very gods. No one seemed much concerned about the dead priestesses, but financial catastrophe on the horizon perturbed them very much.

I realized it was dawn. After a long day's traveling, a tedious dinner, and these late-hour dramatics, I simply had to call things to a halt. I am afraid my Roman fortitude was giving way to age. I left Arpocras and the centurion in charge and withdrew.

In the days that followed I continued to reside in the house of Licinius Aper, as it was the largest and most luxurious in the town, and nothing less would befit the dignity of my office, for all I, personally, would have been content with a comfortable, quiet room somewhere.

I worked very hard. I got very little sleep. It was not merely because Licinius Aper had a habit of bursting in on me at any hour that pleased, offering suggestions, more than once demanding to know if I had arrested "that blasphemous fiend, Clodius Carus."

I reminded him that I was the imperial *legatus* here, and I would give the orders for arrests. I assured him that investigations were proceeding.

"But it's so obvious, *obvious*," he sputtered, wringing his meaty hands as he left.

Perhaps he was trying to distract me from my more expected duties, for he and his colleagues could not have been comfortable

about what I was doing. As more and more of the town records were brought to me, it was clear that temples and bridges and the new theater cost three times what they should have, that some projects accounted for had not even been built. When I went out one afternoon to see the famous theater, I concluded that it would *never* be completed because the ground had not been surveyed, some of the walls were already sinking into soft earth, and the whole place was likely to collapse before it was opened. I also found evidence that persons convicted of serious crimes had managed to have their sentences erased, or even transferred to others, for the payment of a suitable bribe. In short, my host and all his colleagues were clearly, as the popular expression has it, lining their togas with municipal gold. There were going to be some prosecutions here, quite aside from the matter of the dead priestesses and the missing goddess.

As for that, Pudens quickly came to the conclusion that the goddess had not, precisely, *walked*—whether or not she actually had legs was not the point.

He spoke in a whisper, lest some of our host's servants might be eavesdropping. We were having this conversation in the central courtyard of the house, where a chair and table had been set up for me in the garden, so I could work comfortably by daylight.

"I think friend Licinius Aper stole the goddess himself."

"But how?"

"Those muscular slaves of his."

"Just four of them?" said Arpocras. "Even for them, that's a heavy statue."

"Maybe they come in matched sets. If he has three quartets, they could have done it."

"They could have just wheeled her off in her car," I suggested.

"I looked into that, sir," said Arpocras. "The car is in its shed behind the temple. It is not missing."

"But why would he do it?" I asked. "Why would he ruin his own city—and his own income?"

"Isn't that obvious?" said Pudens. "So he could blame it on the men of the rival city, Juliopolis. He'd like nothing more than you to march in there with a legion, knock the place down, and crucify the entire population, starting with this—this—"

"Clodius Carus," said Arpocras.

"Yes. His enemy. It all makes sense. The structure of the explanation is complete and perfectly logical."

"Now all you have to account for is the supernatural manifestations, the noises, the miraculous light," said Arpocras, "not to mention the murdered priestesses. The town is quite full of stories, if

you care to go out and hear them."

"I could hardly—"

Indeed, he could hardly mix inconspicuously with the local populace, a large, tall, pale Roman. But Arpocras, a Greek, could. "Nevertheless, I can explain those things," said Pudens.

"Do so."

"Aper's henchmen killed the priestesses—bludgeoned them—then carried off the statue, perhaps in an ordinary wagon filled with straw. Well *after* the deed was done, but before it was discovered, some of them set the oil and incense on fire, then rushed out into the city to spread the alarm. Rumor and panic took care of the rest."

Arpocras looked up at him and smiled. "Very good. I see I have been able to teach you some of my methods," he said. "Logical, yes. Complete, yes, as far as it goes. But is it everything? Maybe it requires a few flourishes and decorations in the Oriental fashion."

It was Arpocras who provided most of the final flourishes. But not all of them.

It was he, too, who suggested, more by subtle hints than by stating it outright, that I might be in actual danger, since no one knew what a man like Licinius Aper might do if sufficiently desperate. If I found sufficient evidence to convict him of a crime, what further crime might he—or some of his colleagues—attempt to protect themselves?

But if I were to move out of Aper's house, refusing his hospitality, wouldn't that bring about a final crisis?

Arpocras insisted that we must seize the initiative. As always, he was right.

I consulted with my centurion. Most of the soldiers were quartered elsewhere, their function being to protect my party as we journeyed across the countryside, not against sedition inside a friendly city. But at the same time, if the centurion came daily to confer with me on official business, there was nothing Aper could do. I waved him out of earshot. The emperor's business is mine and the emperor's and not his. He could not pretend otherwise.

Therefore I announced one day that my party and the guards were going outside the city to see the much-discussed, overpriced aqueduct. Licinius Aper offered to accompany me, "for the pleasure of the journey," he said in that oily, completely unconvincing stage manner of his. With hopefully more politeness and perhaps better acting skills, I forbade this, out of gracious concern for his health, the heat of the day, the roughness of the roads—and I didn't mention his girth even once.

He looked unhappy, but we left, Pudens, Arpocras, and myself in our carriage, the soldiers on horseback, some of our secretarial staff following in a cart.

We went out to the aqueduct, about which I shall report in detail in another letter. It is indeed overpriced and defective. We inspected it thoroughly, deliberately taking our time doing so. Then, late in the afternoon, after a pause for a rest in the shade of some trees, we made our way back.

Before we reached Claudiopolis, however, a man who had been waiting by the side of the road got up and began jogging alongside the carriage. One of the soldiers made to interfere, but I waved him away and Arpocras caught the fellow by the wrist and hauled him aboard.

The newcomer was a short, wiry Greek, a little younger than Arpocras, though, his hair mostly still dark. If I may trust my instincts, there was something about this man, too, like Licinius Aper when I first met him, that I did not like. If Arpocras was my Greek crow, this fellow was more of a vulture.

Arpocras introduced him as a certain Theon. My Greek had wandered about the city for some days, mixing in low places, jangling purses of money in exchange for information, and now, as the climax of his efforts, we enjoyed the company of this Theon.

He was, to be blunt, an informer. When Arpocras dangled another purse of coins in front of him, he became most loquacious about the sins of Licinius Aper, which he enumerated in more detail than I could remember, although Arpocras was taking notes. But then I bade him get to the point and tell me where the stolen Venus was.

"In the house of Aper, of course," he said.

"But I have been staying in Aper's house."

"He has more than one house, sir. Surely you knew that? A man as rich as him, you'd expect it."

Arpocras nodded. It was so. Unsurprisingly, Licinius Aper had invested much of his wealth in several houses, which he rented out, and a few farms, which he worked profitably, but the place of interest was a villa he had up in the hills, a little beyond the city, to which he normally retired to escape the summer weather. He had only remained in his city house, out of season, because he knew I was coming, and would have to reside in the city to do my work.

Theon wanted to leave, but I wouldn't let him. The centurion had his instructions. The informant held onto his bag of money, but otherwise sat in the carriage glumly.

We returned to the city-house of Licinius Aper, but the horsemen did not dismount, nor did I get out of the carriage. I sent one of the

secretaries in to fetch him. When he emerged, I leaned out between the curtains of the carriage—it would not do to let him see our informant—and told him where we were going. I suggested he come with us.

He pleaded his health, the heat, the roughness of the road.

"Nevertheless, I think you should come," I said.

There was nothing he could do. He followed in his own carriage, driven by one of his burly slaves. And so the whole company, carriages, carts, the troop of mounted soldiers, wound through the town and up into the hills, where, after a time, it was indeed cooler. A pleasant breeze blew. It was nearly sunset by the time we reached the villa. Under other circumstances, I might have appreciated the view, or even written a poem about it.

But not now. My mind was turning. The last pieces of the puzzle were coming into place. Pudens, Arpocras, and I had all sat in silence during the journey, each of us thinking. I exchanged glances with my colleagues, but none of us wanted to say anything in front of Theon.

We burst into the house without formalities, leaving the porter and the household slaves fluttering, trying to make excuses to their master.

"This is an *imposition*," Licinius Aper protested. "After all my hospitality, all my kindnesses, is this how you repay me?"

"I *believe* something, which I hope is wrong," I replied. "I sincerely hope I am misinformed. If I am, someone will pay, and I will give you my profoundest apologies."

"Well, then, let's go back to the city and discuss this over dinner like gentlemen, shall we?"

Instead I proceeded to a certain room. The door was locked.

"There's nothing in there," said Aper. "That room is not in use."

I nodded, and some of the soldiers forced the door.

It was a large, high-ceilinged room, with murals on the walls. It might have been an extra dining room, or even a bedroom, but there was no furniture in it now, and it was, indeed, not in use.

The thousand-breasted Venus leaned against the back wall, propped up rather precariously, her arms reaching out toward us. Now that I saw it up close, it was, indeed, a deeply alien thing, a frightful image, really, of perhaps great antiquity. It had no legs, breasts covering the whole body, front and back but for the arms, and a fierce, masklike face. It was, I would guess, about ten feet tall.

Some of those present let out cries of amazement. A couple of the Aper's servants tried to run, but soldiers caught them. Pudens, Arpocras, and I all looked at one another, as if to say, *It is as I thought*, even if, very likely, some of our theories differed.

But before any of us could congratulate one another, Licinius Aper put on the most amazing performance of his otherwise unconvincing career. He knelt before the goddess. He beseeched her forgiveness. For all he purported to despise barbaric images, I think he was afraid. I think he saw the workings of supernatural providence in this. I think that, far more than anyone else, he was utterly and genuinely astonished to find her here.

All of my theories collapsed at that point. I was at a loss. Before I could say anything or do anything, the whole scene came to its dreadful climax. I don't know if Licinius Aper had somehow bumped against the statue, or if his massive bulk dropping down before it had shaken it from its doubtful balance, or if there was another, less explicable cause, but so quickly that no one could react, stone began to grind and the goddess *moved*. She fell forward, her marble arms reaching out to embrace Licinius Aper, her awful face bending down to kiss him—or to devour him.

The statue crashed to earth. There came more cries of amazement and horror. Several people ran from the room, and no one stopped them. In the eyes of the Greeks, I am sure, the goddess had taken her vengeance. All I can say is that there was a lot of blood, both arms and the head broke off, and marble breasts scattered all over the floor.

I, too, wanted to run away, but I remained steadfast. Even Arpocras looked on speechless, as did Pudens. I was the one who managed to tell the centurion to bring the informer Theon in to see what had happened, and when he did, as Theon reacted, the chain of events almost began to make sense again. Almost but not quite. There were still huge and mysterious gaps.

Theon rejoiced. He laughed. He virtually danced for joy, and once more launched into a vast recital of the sins of Licinius Aper, which only stopped when I broke in and said, "I arrest you, Clodius Carus, on some charge or other. I am sure I will think of something."

He babbled in protest as the soldiers grabbed him. I turned from the horrible scene and hurried away.

Arpocras ran after me. I have never seen him so flustered. I think what amazed him the most was that for once I'd thought of something he had not.

"But . . . how did you know it was Carus?"

"He and Aper were two of a kind. Who else would know so much about a man's misdeeds, and be so eager to relate them, except his mortal enemy? Aper and Carus had this fault in common. They both talked too much."



These events did not settle the puzzling affair, Most Noble Emperor, not entirely.

Since Clodius Carus was not a Roman citizen, I could have him interrogated locally. I am told he became incoherent under torture, but there was evidence of sufficient crimes that I had him executed.

Yet the enigma remains. There are three explanations at which one might grasp: the first, that Licinius Aper stole the goddess, hid it in his country villa, and merely put on a last, desperate performance for us when his enemy, who had learned of it, exposed him. But I reject this. He was too convincing at the end. He wore his lies like a badly fashioned mask. I think he was sincerely astonished and even terrified to see the goddess there.

Or could it be that the fatally loquacious Clodius Carus stole the goddess, placed it in Aper's villa with the connivance of corrupted slaves in order to destroy his enemy? The image actually crushing Aper was an accident, but the result was the same. This, indeed, is what both Servilius Pudens and Arpocras think happened.

The people of Claudiopolis cling to a third view, toward which in unguarded moments, I lean myself: that Aper stole the goddess, hid her elsewhere, and she came of her own accord to deliver her vengeance.

I write to you then, sir, with a specific question.

Something has to be put back into the temple to restore the religious commerce of the city. Was Arpocras correct, that the true forms of divinities may never be apprehended by human senses, and that consequently all such images, however grotesque they might seem to Roman eyes, are equally sacred? Should I take this opportunity to install a proper Roman Venus in the temple, or should I employ a local craftsman to recreate the goddess in her original form?

4. Trajan to Pliny

You should restore the goddess in her original form, to which the Bithynians are accustomed. It would certainly be out of keeping with the spirit of our age to demand such a change in immemorial religious usage.

Very likely, your wise Arpocras is correct. Certainly the gods and goddesses work through human agencies in mysterious ways. No one can deny that. ♣

SKIN AND BONES

DAVID EDGERLEY GATES

New York's a city that's forever reinventing itself. In lower Manhattan, excavations for a water main or a subway line will uncover graves from a forgotten potter's field, or a shellfish midden predating the Dutch. The public library between Fifth and Sixth is built on the site of the old Croton reservoir, itself once a formidable monument to nineteenth-century ambition and ingenuity. Times change, and the landscape of the city changes with them. Where once there was a boundary between the wild and sown, for example, in Peter Stuyvesant's day, is now Wall Street. The footprints are all about, if only you take notice.

And of course New York's a place that invites reinvention. Irish and Italians, Germans and Swedes, Ashkenazi immigrants from Eastern Europe, Armenians, Levantines, and Greeks, the tidal migration north of Negroes between the wars, apple-cheeked kids from Iowa, and streetwise toughs from Jersey, all of them hungry for adventure or advancement, Anglicizing their names, rewriting their histories, imagining their own creation myth.

Dede van Rensselaer had been born Deirdre O'Donnell. The orphaned child of a whore, she grew up in the workhouses and was turned out onto the streets when she was fourteen. She fell into the natural grasp of a pimp and was jobbed out to the trade. If you'd asked her why she didn't seek to enter service as a domestic, she would have guffawed. Where was the practical difference? In either case, you were property. She was, as it happened, rescued by one of her clients. Not so rare an event as you might think. She married above herself and never looked back. I was startled by her invitation to lunch.

We met at the Waldorf. I knew it only from the salad. But she cared little for appearances, that was plain.

"Mickey, it's been twenty years," she said, offering me her hand. I took it. "Ma'am." She was probably the one on thin ice, not me. "Would you care for a cocktail?" she asked.

"Better, perhaps, that I keep my wits about me," I said, as I took my seat.

Edward Kinsella III



Her laughter was like a chime, nothing artificial or forced about it at all. She'd certainly kept her gamine charm.

"I'd share a bottle of wine," I said, leaning against it.

She ordered a Bordeaux. The wine steward and the maitre d' apparently knew her well.

She rubbed the cork between her fingers and passed it beneath her nostrils. She approved. I let her order the meal for both of us as well. We raised our glasses.

"The future," she said.

It was the shared past we were drinking to, I imagined, but we clicked rims.

Scallops, *en croute*, a green salad, beef Wellington. More pastry, in fine, than I would have chosen, given the pounds I've put on in my age. But it was her treat, and her schedule.

We came to it over coffee.

A girl, she told me. Not much above fourteen, but already slightly soiled and shopworn from the life. Undernourished, just skin and bones. Wary, a little feral, perhaps, mistrustful of solicitude.

"Why?" I asked her. I meant, what was her interest.

"Oh, Mickey," she said. "Isn't it obvious? She reminds me of me, at that age."

"Nothing further?"

She smiled and shook her head, sadly. "I see where you're going. No. She's not my illegitimate daughter, or the like. If it were blackmail, I'd face it out, or hire a private dick to break some heads."

Something she knew full well I had a name for.

"Not that, either," she said, reading my expression.

I nodded. Rented muscle is easily found. The rich have lawyers and dogsbodies to insulate them from responsibility or consequence. "Why call in an old marker, then?" I asked her.

She looked at me with level regard, and then her focus shifted past me, into some indeterminate middle distance. "I'd say I owed *you*, Mickey, not the other way around." She spoke without addressing me directly, or as if she weren't talking about herself. "You never took advantage of me back then. I even wondered if you were queer. For all that you're no doubt a hard man, and a wicked one, you've got a sentimental streak."

"I've a weakness for the downtrodden," I said, meaning some irony.

"You wear it lightly," she said, letting her eyes meet mine again. They were blue and transparent, like Arctic ice.

I shifted my weight, uncomfortably.

"You have boys on the street," she said. "Girls, too, for all I

know." She meant the young numbers runners I used. "What I *do* know is that you don't whore them out."

I could see where this was going. "You think my kids would already have noticed her, yes?" I asked.

"Beekman Place," she said.

I knew she lived in the East Fifties. "Not our turf," I said.

But she had a whim of iron. "You could cozy up to her."

"I'd be a john, no more."

"You might win her trust, Mickey."

"A thankless errand," I said.

"You'd have my thanks."

"No good deed goes unpunished, Deirdre," I said.

"And don't I know it," she said, sadly.

Which, on the face of it, was sufficient. In retrospect, I should have been less credulous.

They say there's a broken heart for every light on Broadway. I couldn't tell you, but it feels anecdotally accurate. All those children who come here, wild with ambition. How many of them fall through the cracks? How many of them suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune? I was a product of the West Side streets myself, Hell's Kitchen. If the mob hadn't found me and taken me under its wing, I'd have been bait for predators.

This is not merely philosophy.

It was 1949. Along the East River, ground had been broken for the United Nations. Sutton Place and Beekman were old and established, respectable addresses, and the foreign legations were eager to snap them up. Real estate values were going right through the roof. But at curbside, prices were stagnant.

"Bareback blow job, two bucks," one of my kids told me.

"Is that how she makes the rent?" I asked.

"She can always sleep on top of a heating grate, or under a cardboard box."

"You speaking specifically, or generically?"

She shook her head. "I don't know her," she said.

"Can you *get* to know her, Judy?" I asked. She looked at me suspiciously.

How much do you give away? They were sly, they were hungry, they were survivors, they'd shovel their competition under a subway train for the odd dime. I had to be frank. "It's a favor for a friend," I said. "I want her looked after."

"Would you do it for me, Mickey?" she asked.

She was thirteen, just shy of puberty. I could have turned her out and gotten a return. "Yes," I told her. It was true.

"Okay," she said. Wise beyond her years.

I protected my kids, unlike some, but it wasn't sentiment. I was investing in the future. People might tell you that there's an infinite pool of throwaway talent, the abandoned and forlorn, and in brute fact they're thrown away daily, like candy wrappers, but if we eat our own young, hope dies.

Not that the children weren't themselves carnivorous. Judy would interpret my writ however she chose, and not necessarily to my liking. All the same, I wanted her and the other canny lads to see the job through. They were my only decent chance to get at Dede's lost girl. It was a small ambition.

I worked a different angle. Two dollars, Judy had told me. What was the girl's market? Sutton Place and Beekman.

I started with the doormen.

They were a mixed lot. Insular, territorial, proprietary. Some of them were protective, some of them were condescending, some of them were hostile. All of them were for sale. It was a matter of meeting their price.

Dede's own doorman, on Beekman, had an inflated idea of his own importance. I didn't use her name, of course, which would have gained me nothing in any case, but crossing his palm with silver gained me nothing either. He was either obtuse or willfully ignorant. His knowledge of the neighborhood was sadly deficient, and none of what he shared was useful.

I had better luck with a colored man at an apartment house on Sutton. He'd been at his trade since before the war, and I put his age at above sixty. He carried himself with brittle dignity, treading that careful line between deference and pride. The nameplate on his uniform read Judah Benjamin, which I thought curiously Hebrew, but it was only coincidence, his last name the residue of some long-dead white slaveholder, his first the legacy of a Bible-thumping mother who'd spent too much time reading the Old Testament. He had a sense of humor about it. I was careful not to press a slight and ambiguous advantage.

"A white girl, maybe fourteen?"

I nodded.

"You looking to turn her out?"

I'd laid a twenty on the counter, and he'd ignored it. This was a delicate negotiation. I didn't want him to imagine insult. I put a second cautious twenty down beside the first one. "I could," I said, "if that were my object. But why then would I be so circumspect?"

He shrugged.

"I might tell you a story neither one of us would believe," I said. "Why bother?"

"But you mean her no injury."

"I'm offering what I'd imagine was a benefit."

"A mixed blessing."

"What has she got now?"

He smiled, shifting his gaze away from mine. His eyes were very old. "She has her freedom," he said.

"No," I said. "She has choices."

He looked at me again. "I know you," he said.

"Or somebody very like me," I admitted.

He was on the edge of trust, but his experience told him better. "Russians, Arabs, Jews," he said, shaking his head. "I came to Harlem a lifetime ago."

I had a notion what he was driving at. "I grew up in New York," I told him. "I was a mick from the West Side. I worked the docks and joined a union, or I signed up with the cops."

"You signed up with the mob," he said.

I nodded. "I stepped on the third rail," I said.

"I grew up in the South," he said. "My father was a jailbird. A lifer at Angola prison. You know what that means?"

I could guess, but I really couldn't imagine.

"I came North. I left my mother; I left my brothers and sisters behind. I came for the promised land. I was too old to go in the service when the war came. But let me tell you, the '30s, the '40s, the pussy was unbelievable. It was lying around like bottle caps."

"A lifetime ago," I suggested.

"Yeah," he said. "Well."

"Let me ask you something, Judah," I said. "Back in the day, the Cotton Club, the Apollo, when you were a player. Would you have used this girl and cast her aside?"

He nodded. "A stiff Johnson's got no conscience."

"Let me ask you a different question," I said. "Russians, Arabs, Jews. What'd you mean by that? I'd think the kid's natural clientele would be your own tenants, guys coming home after a hard day at the office, don't get it from the secretary, don't get it from the wife, buy a quickie on the sidewalk."

"I don't much appreciate your vocabulary," he said.

"It gives me some sleepless nights," I told him.

The two twenties vanished. His hand passed across the counter in front of him and the bills disappeared, like a magic trick. I thought I'd lost him. I didn't know how to recover my limited advantage.

"I can tell you where to find her," Judah said.

"That's a start," I suggested.

"Diplomats," he said. There was contempt in his voice.

"You talking about the UN?"

"Yeah, the You an'," he said sarcastically.

Nobody back then used the locution UN much. Most people thought the entire enterprise a joke. It was located out in Flushing Meadows, an ash dump before the 1939 World's Fair. Now it was slated to be developed on prime east waterfront.

"Money attracts money," I said.

"You ain't just whistling 'Dixie,'" he said.

I smiled. "You don't strike me as the sort of man who'd be likely to whistle 'Dixie,'" I said.

He ducked his head, concealing a laugh in his collar.

"The girl, then," I said. "She services these newcomers."

"They take it when the tray is passed," he said.

"You know her name?" I asked.

"Maggie," he said. "May not be the one she was born with."

"That's all?"

"We pass the time of day. I give her a dollar."

"Not two?"

"I don't need no blow job from a fourteen-year-old white girl," he said. "Some kid with no ass in her pants and one step away from the needle."

Skin and bones, Deirdre had said. "You know that?" I asked him. Heroin and coke weren't as common on the street as they are now. Jazz musicians, some Bohemians who smoked dope, but it was a Negro thing, or so many of us were willing to think.

"Way things are," he said. "It's how their pimps keep them under their thumb."

"So she's a hophead?"

"Not today, maybe, but tomorrow or the next. She might not be courting salvation," he said.

I agreed. "Depends what she's running away from," I said.

"Frying pan into the fire."

I agreed with that too.

"You can't fix all the sadness in this world, Irish," Judah said to me. "Some of it's beyond repair."

He seemed like somebody who'd know.

I would have tried the beat cops next, but the police found me first. I'd wandered down First Avenue as far as the corner of Forty-eighth, where the UN construction site began. It was one hell of a big hole, between First Avenue and the river, and extending six blocks south, the whole of it barricaded with cyclone fencing and plywood. But there were peepholes cut in the plywood every ten or twelve feet, both at adult eye level and for kids, to accommodate sidewalk supervisors. I was looking

through one of them, not able to envision much, since the footings hadn't yet been poured, let alone the concrete forms for foundation work. In fact, the crews had either hit groundwater or the East River was leaking in because the entire excavation was a muddy, sucking wound, swallowing bulldozers and backloaders, time and money. I wondered how far behind schedule they were by now, and who'd been fool enough to post completion bonds.

I turned when I heard the car pull up at the curb behind me. It was a big prewar Lincoln, the V-12, but I knew its owner had never been inconvenienced by gasoline rationing.

A rumpled, overweight guy in a cheap off-the-rack suit got out of the passenger side. He looked irritated.

"Sergeant," I said, pleasantly enough. I kept my hands in my pockets, representing no threat. O'Toole would have been all too happy to grind my face into the pavement.

"Pat would like a word," he said, inclining his head.

O'Toole was an errand boy and a precinct bagman, all the more dangerous for being both stupid and aggrieved. He wasn't, in fine, the sort you'd want to meet if he were off his master's leash. I had no call to aggravate him further.

I got into the passenger seat of the Packard. O'Toole left the door open and drifted a few yards off.

"Mickey," the man behind the wheel said, smiling.

"Pat."

Patrick Francis Gallagher was a lieutenant of detectives. He'd started out as a harness bull, like so many others, and by virtue of luck and opportunity, and an easy way with the necessities of criminal enterprise, he made ready advancement. He was bent. I wouldn't complain if he'd been compromised by the Hannahs, my own mob, but he was in the pocket of Frank Costello and a creature of the Italians.

"What's your interest in underage whores, Mickey?" he asked me.

"Word gets around," I said, ducking the question. I'd only been canvassing the neighborhood that very morning.

"Enough of the road apples," he said. "What's your stake in it? Are the Hannahs looking to expand their territory to the East Side?"

It was a curve ball, but it gave me an alibi. I swung on it. "I thought this was open turf, Pat," I said. "Would you be telling me different?"

He was too slippery to give me a straight answer. We were like two card players, feeling out our respective strength early in the

game, trying to read each other's betting pattern before we committed our chips. Gallagher, in this case, checked. "You still answer to Tim Hannah?" he asked.

"As always," I told him.

"Then tell Young Tim to back away," he said.

This, of course, had nothing to do with the Hannahs, but a thing takes on its own momentum, and it was about to run over me like a truck with bad brakes.

I had nothing to report to Dede as yet, but it was early days, or so I thought. I'd put some feelers out myself, my kids were keeping an eye peeled, so all in all, best foot forward. Pat Gallagher might prove to be a riddle, I knew, but for the moment I figured he was just blowing smoke up my ass.

It was coming on dusk, and the kids began to trickle in. There were half a dozen countinghouses and money drops located across Midtown, but this was a storefront on Tenth Avenue, where my runners congregated at the end of the day, swapping war stories and ragging on each other. The building was owned by the Hannahs, and I'd outfitted the upper three stories: bunk beds, a community kitchen, and some semblance of privacy. They were outlaws, thrown away, and I offered them safety. Not that it didn't come at a price. They understood what we traded for, and our currency was loyalty, both up and down.

"Haven't seen her," Judy told me.

"All day?"

She beckoned another kid over. Roger Tuohy, the Artful Roger, she called him. Ten years old, he was, and already something of a slippery character. Where she'd come up with this literary label, I wasn't to know. Maybe it was accident, or she'd spent overmuch time in the public library, a warm place for the homeless and otherwise dispossessed.

"Gone," he said.

Gone from her usual haunts, I asked him, or disappeared?

"Just gone," he told me.

They had their secrets, and I wasn't meant to intrude. They had a private language, a coded vocabulary, from which I was excluded.

"Where might she go?" I asked Judy.

She shrugged.

I bit the bullet. "Somebody very much like you, a girl who grew up in the streets, she asked me to look out for Maggie."

Judy, being who she was, went straight for the weak point in my argument. "Why?" she asked. The same question I'd asked, because it was the obvious one, of Dede.

"She said the girl reminded her of herself, at the same age and in much the same circumstance."

"I never thought of you as sentimental, Mickey."

Meaning she'd felt the back of my hand in times past. "The street's a stricter discipline than mine, Judy," I reminded her.

"You want us to find her for you."

"That's what I asked of you before."

"No, you asked me if I could gain her confidence."

I smothered a smile. Kids can be very literal, almost lawyerly. It comes, I'd imagine, from their heightened sense of unfairness. "Same difference, if she's gone missing," I said.

"Okay," she said, accepting the arbitrary gap in logic.

"Work in pairs," I told her.

"One of us gets pinched, the other one's around to tell the tale?" she asked mischievously.

"I was considering your safety."

"Tell the truth and shame a liar."

"The cops are sniffing around the edges of this, so there's more to it than meets the eye. I'm thinking the Italians."

I was telling her more than she needed to know, and she saw I was residing a trust in her.

"Watch each other's back," I said. "Don't get careless."

She gave me a contemptuous thirteen-year-old's look, and turned away.

"Jude," I said.

She swung back, impatient with my secondguessing her.

"Something about this doesn't feel right," I told her. "If it smells dangerous, back away."

"Every time," she said with a wink and an evil grin, then went off to round up her posse. The girl had more chutzpah than an Italian *caporegime*, and fewer doubts.

My doubts began with Dede. I'd taken her at her word, but now I was beginning to think she might have taken me for a ride.

An unworthy thought, so I put it to the test.

We met, of course, like conspirators. I couldn't very well telephone her at home and have her husband answer. I used a method we'd arranged in advance, the after-hours delivery of her dry cleaning. A private note, ten bucks to the Chinaman.

We were at a bar on Third Avenue, in the shadow of the El. This was back when there *was* a Third Avenue elevated. It was an anonymous kind of joint, but it was busy enough to give us cover. The dinner hour was fast approaching; any saloon in New York

that serves liquor has to serve food, even if it's soggy steam-table discards, and the two of us together were as anonymous as the place. I was waiting on a stool at the near end of the bar, and she'd

Beneath the pavement, the city is a maze of service levels that go 60 feet down or more, a secret circulatory system, much of it unmapped and lost to living memory.

known enough to wear a plaid cloth coat, not mink.

Dede and I didn't bother to

act surprised to see each other. I stood up, she took a seat, I sat down again. I was nursing a weak scotch and water. She ordered a Canadian Club and soda. I paid.

"Have you seen her, spoken to her?" she asked.

"No," I said, "but a couple of my runners have."

"And?"

"Nobody gets close to her, from what the kids tell me."

"Could they?"

"They're not a trusting lot, themselves," I told her. "And she's not one of them."

"Could you bring her into the fold, at least get her out of the life?"

"It was somewhere in the back of my mind," I admitted.

"But she'd still be an outsider, not an initiate."

"All my kids were outsiders, once," I said. "That's the appeal of being in a gang, the sense of belonging. You have to understand something, Dede. They're clannish, they're tribal, they're protective of one another. It's a pack mentality. They won't accept just any stray dog who happens onto their turf."

"In time, perhaps?"

"Time we don't have," I said. "As soon as I started asking around, it put the cat among the pigeons."

"What do you mean?" She was genuinely alarmed.

"I suggested to one of my kids that she try and get close to the girl." I held up a hand, forestalling comment. "It wouldn't be clumsy sympathy, believe me. More an actively hostile approach, if I don't miss my guess, challenging the girl for dominance, or territory. It's a protocol."

"I remember."

"My own reconnaissance was less direct."

"You talked to my doorman," she said. She didn't smile.

"Among others," I said. "Thing is, you're not the only one he reported it to."

"You're not a physical presence that goes unnoticed."

I shook my head. "I didn't choose to make my presence threatening," I told her. "I might not have been the soul of discretion, but

I didn't see what harm could come of it. In the event, I was wrong."

"What happened?"

"Inside of two, maybe three hours, I'd attracted police attention. A lieutenant of detectives named Pat Gallagher, as crooked as they come. Not a man you'd like to have your name on his list."

"What did he want?"

"He wanted to know my interest."

"What did you tell him?"

"As it happens, he provided his own answer."

"Which was?"

"That it had to do with the Hannahs, expanding into new territory. I left him thinking that. It was the easy way. But now I want the truth."

"I told you the truth."

"You told me a half truth," I said, "which is as dangerous as a lie. And when I went into it blind, I got ambushed."

"I never meant to put you at risk," she said.

"I'll give you the benefit of the doubt, Deirdre, but you never would have come to me in the first place if you'd thought there was no risk attached."

"My husband—" she began, turning the glass in her hands.

"Your husband knows you were a whore," I said, interrupting her. It was a purposely unpleasant choice of words.

She stopped fooling with her drink and met my gaze. There was enough sorrow there, and steel, that I dropped my eyes. "My husband," she said, evenly, "has taken advantage of this girl's services, just as he once took advantage of mine. But we made a deal, something he's been gentleman enough to let me forget."

"Until now."

"We all make compromises, Mickey," she said.

"And even a van Rensselaer needs his ashes hauled," I said. "Once in a great while."

"He never felt the lack," Dede said, sad but defiant.

She was so vulnerable and forlorn, I had to relent. "How come you didn't tell me any of this before?" I asked her.

"You would have read the worst into it," she said.

"I'm reading the worst into it now," I said.

"Even if it were a half truth, Mickey, it was still honest. She reminds me of me, and the choices I had to make."

"Fair enough," I said.

"Are you going to help her?"

"She's vanished."

"How can that be?"

"My kids tell me she hasn't been seen on the street for the last day and a half." In case she missed the point, I made it more specific. "She might have slipped through the cracks, but nobody's noticed her since you came and asked me whether I could get chummy with her."

"This isn't good, Mickey," she said.

"You're telling me?"

Dede ducked her head. "I'm telling *you*," she said.

The runaway truck flattened me about an hour later, when it came full dark, eight o'clock that night, say.

It was my own damn fault.

I'd seen her home, from a discreet distance, of course; she never knew I was there.

Then from Beekman and Sutton, I'd walked over to the UN construction site. Why it conjured much up, I couldn't say. It was still a morass.

There were cops all over the place. I should have walked away, and I started to, but O'Toole caught me looking.

First he cuffed me. Then, with my hands behind my back, he cracked me across the face.

"Give over that," a voice said. It was Gallagher.

I was leaking blood and snot, and I could do no better than wipe my nose on the upper part of my sleeve.

"You were asking about this girl," Gallagher said.

I hawked up a gob. My face hurt. "Which girl?" I asked.

"The dead one," he said. "What reason did you have to kill her?"

I was behind in the pitch count.

"Aw, now, Mickey," Gallagher said, leaning in close, "you'd be the last one to have seen her alive, I don't miss my guess."

"When would that have been?" I asked.

"Last hour or so," he said. "Back of her body's still warm to the touch."

I couldn't very well use Dede for an alibi, although she'd have been eager to give it, in spite of the embarrassment. "How do you mean, the *back* of her body?" I asked him.

"After the rape, you drowned her in three inches of water," he said. "Held her facedown until she choked."

"You're telling me she's not even stiff yet?"

He shrugged. "There's no rigor to speak of. You ready to come clean with me?"

"You're sucking air, Pat," I said. "You've got no gas in the carburetor. I had no motive to kill the girl, for one, and if she died in the

last two hours, I've got witnesses who'll place me elsewhere, and I don't mean the kind of witnesses I can buy. Now get over yourself. Take off the cuffs."

"It was worth a shot," he said, and signaled to O'Toole.

O'Toole unlocked the handcuffs and left my hands free.

"Get lost," Gallagher said, turning away.

I massaged my wrists. "Tell fat boy not to do that again," I said.

Gallagher swung around. I felt O'Toole's whiskey breath on the nape of my neck.

"Fat boy, is it?" Gallagher inquired, dangerously.

"I'll take the gun back too," I said. O'Toole had frisked me and taken the .38 Super autoloader.

There was a moment where it could have gone either way, but pride gave way to the practical. Indecision, or loss of nerve? I couldn't say. Gallagher knew I had a Sullivan Act card, which meant I could legally carry a firearm concealed. He raised his chin. O'Toole handed me the .38, butt first. I reversed it and tucked it inside my waistband at the small of my back.

"All right, then," Gallagher said, dismissively.

"Show me the victim," I said.

He hesitated, and then shrugged. "Why not?" he agreed.

We made our way down into the enormous trench. The soil was loose and the footing treacherous. Banks of emergency lights cast deep pools of shadow. Up on more solid ground, a diesel generator hammered. Gallagher and I stumbled through the muck, earth sucking at our shoes.

The dead girl was at the bottom of the slope, her clothes disordered, her limbs splayed out akimbo, the exposed skin pale and clammy, tinged with a bluish cast. Skin and bones, Dede had said. The body looked to weigh no more than eighty pounds. I glanced upslope toward the lip of the trench. There were footprints everywhere. Whatever might have been there to see, once upon a time, had been trampled across, twice over. I knelt down beside the corpse. Her hair was dark, stringy and matted, clotted with mud. I lifted a strand away from her face. Her eyes were still open, but without depth or reflection. The dead are like that, their eyes lightless. I grunted to my feet.

"What do you know about this, Mickey?" Gallagher asked.

"No more than you," I said. "Probably less." I looked up, studying the slope again. "But she didn't die down here."

"Why would you think that?"

"Educated guess," I said. "I'd imagine you could gain access to the site through a break in the hoardings." I pointed up at the plywood barrier at street level. "Ease through the fencing, you'd be in

darkness, have some privacy. Enough to get your business done and not be interrupted."

"Her business was on her knees," Gallagher said.

I nodded. "A man your size, or mine, how much trouble would it be to strangle her with your thumbs?" I asked him. "Or break her neck? As easily as a pigeon's."

"Or a soiled dove," he remarked.

"There's bruising on her throat, Pat," I said.

"Dirt," he said.

"No," I said. "Black-and-blue marks."

He looked at his feet. "You figure he killed her up there and then slid her over the edge."

"Take her to Bellevue," I said. "Have a coroner examine the body. I doubt that she drowned or suffocated. I'd say she died before she got to the bottom of the hole."

"Waste of time," he said. "She's just another runaway."

Discarded. It put me in mind of Judy. "I'll make it worth your while," I said.

"Will you?" He looked at me, his interest rekindled. "Why would you do that?"

I looked down again at the dead girl at our feet, her white limbs spilled crossways in the dirt. "A debt," I said.

"What do you owe a dead whore?" he asked me.

"The future she never had," I told him.

So there it was, for all to see. Mickey Counihan, a fool for sentiment. I didn't much care how it looked, and it might even play to my advantage. Pat Gallagher was a man who'd be quick to probe an imagined weakness.

I held a war conference. My troops were battle hardened, after a fashion, wise in the ways of grown-up perfidy, but green where politics were concerned, which I feared they might be.

The captains I chose were Judy and her Artful Roger. "It's the same assignment," I told them, "but the stakes are higher. We're fudging with a homicide investigation, and the cops won't welcome our attention. Don't tangle with either Gallagher or O'Toole. They're dangerous men. Gallagher because he's crafty and smart, but O'Toole because he's cunning and stupid."

They were both very solemn.

"Why did she die?" Judy asked me.

"I'm thinking she was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and it could happen to any of you," I said.

"But it won't," she said.

"Not if I can help it," I told her, "but you're going in harm's

way, and I admit I'm putting you there."

"Is this about her, or us?" she asked.

Fair question, I thought.

"I mean, isn't this *personal* with you, Mickey?" she asked.

"Ach, it's all personal, Judy," I said. "She stands in for the rest of you."

"But she got thrown away."

Wise beyond her years. "Somebody threw her away," I said.

"And you want us to find out who."

"Find out who she *was*, first," I said.

"Maggie, that was her name on the street."

"You can call her that, then."

"We called her that."

I took a breath. "Judy, a girl was killed. You can decide on the name. It doesn't matter to her."

She gazed at me evenly. "Matters to us," she said.

There were too many variables.

I'd been drawn in on the oblique. Dede. And now her husband. And why was Gallagher so ready to paper it over? He was a man with an eye for the main chance, which meant it was political, in the narrow sense, that of self-interest—but all politics is about self-interest, so perhaps it boiled down to whoever, or what, Gallagher was protecting. Turf, or an investment, which probably led back to one or another of the Mafia families, but that seemed too generalized. Bid-rigging on construction, short pours for concrete, mob influence in the building unions. The UN project, for one, was an enormous undertaking, with plenty of wiggle room to inflate costs, but that in itself was either too large, or altogether insufficient, to explain Gallagher's proprietary attitude. He had something more specific in mind. It strikes me funny, now, looking back on it, that he'd been so ready to let me off the hook. The murder charge wouldn't have stuck, but he could have taken me off the streets for seventy-two hours on suspicion, or as a material witness, and he'd held his fire, he'd held his temper, he'd kept O'Toole on a short leash. I had the uncomfortable feeling he was only giving me enough rope, and the phrase that came to mind was stalking horse.

Which brought my thoughts around to Dede again. Unworthy thoughts, yes, but she was no unsoiled dove, and our history was such that I could be manipulated.

On the other hand, if I took Dede at face value, gave her the benefit of the doubt, and further, if I considered the very real

possibility that Pat Gallagher might be fishing on an empty hook, trawling dark waters without any bait, then the situation presented itself in a different light. They were none the wiser than I was.

Something missing, then. A different actor, off-stage, or a different play completely. We'd come to rehearse one drama, and been given the wrong script. Somebody else had all the good lines. We were only extras.

Judah Benjamin, the Negro doorman at the Sutton Place address, wasn't on duty when I dropped by the next morning. The guy working the shift, also colored, but a younger man, was less than forthcoming about when Judah would be there, so I left it alone. I didn't want to give him reason to remember me, or draw too much attention to my movements.

Call me overcautious, but the whole business seemed to be getting too deep, and Maggie's death was in itself an object lesson. It could have been, of course, an unhappy accident, one of the hazards of her trade. I imagined otherwise.

Russians, Arabs, and Jews. Judah had meant the remark as generic shorthand, I thought. He might as well have said Danes or Canadians, but Denmark wasn't fighting a war with Canada. In late 1948, the United Nations had recognized the partition of Palestine, the establishment of Israel, and the neighboring Arab states had attacked. They got their ass handed to them, much to everybody's surprise. Or perhaps not. My own benighted people had been underwriting the IRA since before the Troubles, and why shouldn't American Jews help smuggle guns into Haifa?

The problem with this scenario was that it was too damn general, like the UN construction project. What did it have to do with the murder of a fourteen-year-old street kid? How could she have put any of it, or anybody, at risk?

The wrong place at the wrong time, I'd said to Judy. Which meant I should be looking at it through the other end of the telescope. Who and where. Opportunity first, motive after.

Dede's husband. Not the avenue I wanted to pursue, but where was I going to go next? Even a van Rensselaer needs his ashes hauled, I'd said to her. He never felt the lack, Dede had said to me. I had to wonder. What lack *had* he felt?

I decided to ask. Not that it proved easy.

He was a man with no visible means of support. He was a creature of inherited money. Which didn't dispose him in my favor, but neither did it condemn him. The world is as it is, or how we find it, and if we're not disposed to change it, then we've got no

beef. I'm no Communist. A man takes the advantage he has, and fortune favors the brave.

I wanted to catch van Rensellaer at a disadvantage.

How otherwise? you might well ask.

Most of us are creatures of habit. Even if we don't report to work on an assembly line, or go to an office, we develop a routine. Tinker to Evers to Chance. August van Rensellaer was cut from the same cloth as any commoner. He rose early and went for a walk along the river, taking a small, well-mannered dog. She was, I believe, a Bichon. He went back to the apartment house, dropped the dog off with his doorman, and headed inland, to Second Avenue, where he visited a hotel barber shop to get a facial of hot towels and his morning shave. The hotel was the Mont Royal, an old-fashioned kind of place, where half the rooms were let to long-time residents, and it had a cafeteria, where van Rensellaer took a breakfast of dry cereal and coffee, black. The problem lay not in opportunity, but in my approach.

And there was a further complication.

He was under surveillance by somebody else.

I was simply trawling his wake when I noticed. I broke off immediately.

They weren't private detectives, and they weren't NYPD. Hanging back, I made a team of three, working fore and aft, one ahead of him, one behind, one working laterally, from across the street. Their discipline seemed almost military. They treated the urban environment as hostile territory, like infantry, going house-to-house. And they were too furtive to be in van Rensellaer's employ. If he'd felt in need of personal security, they would have stayed closer, where he'd recognize their presence, but they kept their distance. Van Rensellaer was the kind of man who imagined himself safe in any circumstance, insulated from harm because of money and position. He wasn't a man to watch his back. He had no need.

I should have been watching mine.

They weren't a team of three. They were a team of five. It was the woman who took me off guard. Late middle age, Jewish, enormous handbag, typical New York. She looked to be waiting for a bus. She swung back abruptly from the curb, into my path. I shifted course automatically, to slither past her. I was looking half a block ahead, and got jammed from behind. A kid stepped on my heels, I bumped into the woman, we all stood there looking at each other stupidly, and the apologetic Jewish mom stuck a .380 up against my belt buckle. The boy had another gun screwed into the base of my spine.

"Your dance, ma'am," I said to her, hands down at my side.

"Bei mir bist du schön," she said, grinning.

I've known some tough Jews in my time. Benny Siegel, Meyer Lansky. They never shrank from the necessary. But this was the toughest bunch of Jews you'd ever want to meet.

They took me to a brownstone in the East Fifties, between Third and Lex, a leafy, upscale neighborhood, mostly residential, with the occasional discreet consulting surgeon's office tucked into the

**"We don't trust one another
worth a damn, but we might
find each other useful."**

ground floor. This was one such, with a brass plaque not so much advertising any particular medical service as an-

nouncing its exclusivity. There were no patients in the reception area. I was escorted into a small windowless examining room, where the frisk was thorough. Then they left me.

The room was perhaps twelve feet by eight, brightly lit. There were no cabinets or other built-in furnishings. There was a stainless steel table, on casters, big enough for a recumbent body, which I found a little sinister. There was a drain in the tiled floor. There was a single utilitarian folding chair, like something from a parochial school annex.

In my present circumstance, I was at the whim of somebody else's schedule. I'd learn soon enough what was required of me. I sat down to wait.

Five minutes went by. Then ten. I allowed my metabolism to slow, lizard-like, and let my imagination cool. There was no point in making ill-educated guesses.

The door clicked open. I looked up.

The man in the doorway studied me for a moment. Then he stepped inside, closing the door behind him. He was short, thick through the upper body, with the heavy forearms of a boxer or a weight lifter. Lean in the hips, though, he walked on the balls of his feet, carrying himself almost like a dancer, but he had a specific gravity that kept him earthbound.

"My name is Wolf," he said. He looked it, gray around the muzzle. I put him in his middle to late fifties. I disliked the fact that he'd told me his name, which suggested I might not live to repeat it. There was that drain in the floor.

"Mine is Mickey Counihan," I said. "I work bare knuckles for the Hannah mob, on the West Side. You look like a man who'd know that line of endeavor. My guess is Irgun, or whatever you call yourselves these days, since Partition. Israeli hard boys with a recent grudge."

"Not so recent," he said, smiling. He hiked himself up on the steel table. The casters shifted under his weight. "I have a question for you, Mr. Counihan."

"Only one?"

He shrugged. "It depends how you answer it," he said.

"Van Rensellaer," I said.

He lifted one hand, palm up. It was a gesture centuries old.

"I've got no reason to waste your time," I said.

"Let's not waste it, then," he said.

"Why are you following him?" I asked.

He looked surprised, or disappointed in me.

"It's going to waste less of our time," I told him.

"Our time?"

"A girl was murdered last night. Her name was Maggie. She was all of fourteen years old. Van Rensellaer had, let's say, made her professional acquaintance."

"This girl in your stable?"

"I'm not a pimp."

Wolf thought about it a beat. "What are you?" he asked.

"I'm muscle," I said. "I run a numbers bank."

He got down off the table. "Give me a minute," he said.

"I'm on your clock," I said.

He nodded, and left me in the room.

I put myself to sleep again.

The wait must have been a good twenty minutes this time.

The door opened again. It wasn't Wolf, it was the kid who'd jammed me on the street with the older woman. He motioned me out. I went.

He kept me in front of him. We took two flights of stairs. He ushered me into a study on the third floor.

The door closed behind me. I looked around. It was better appointed than the examination room, walls of books, a sturdy partner's desk, tall windows looking out front and back. It ran the depth of the house. In the back, enclosed inside the block of buildings, there was a garden, shared and secret. The tulips and crocuses had a good start against the late spring. Lilacs were blooming early, the forsythia already wilting. I took none of it for a sign.

Wolf came in. He put my guns down on the desk. "In for a penny, in for a pound, Mickey," he said. "We don't trust one another worth a damn, but we might find each other useful. Does that suit your purpose?"

"Our purposes might still be at odds," I said. "What's van Rensellaer to you?"

"He's a banker."

"I didn't know he worked."

"He's a trustee on several boards."

"Serious money begets even more serious money."

There was a pause. "What do you think about Jews, Mickey?" Wolf asked me.

"Jews put their pants on one leg at a time, same as the rest of us," I said.

He pushed my guns toward me.

I picked up the .38 Super. "Christ-killers," I told him, fitting the gun to the small of my back. "That's what the priest used to tell us, back at St. Aloysius. But he was an ignorant barstid, getting drunk on Communion wine." I scooped up the 7.65, lifted my shoe onto Wolf's desk, and tucked the gun inside my ankle holster. I put my foot back on the floor.

"Not something you care about, then, one way or the other?" Wolf asked me.

"I didn't say that."

"What are you saying?"

"I never met a Jew that didn't keep his word."

"I never met an Irishman who wasn't slippery," he said.

"Tell me about van Rensselaer," I said.

"He's a rock-bottom anti-Semite."

"Jew-haters are a dime a dozen."

"That's been my experience," he said.

"Excuse me," I said. "I meant, give me something that I can use for leverage."

"There's the dead girl you spoke of."

"You've got your reasons to compromise van Rensselaer, I've got mine," I said. "I already know what mine are."

He reached down, pulled one of the desk drawers open, and came up with a fifth of rye, shy a few inches. He fished around some more and came up with two mismatched tumblers. He offered me one, and we each apple-polished them on our sleeves. Wolf poured himself a decent three fingers and handed me the bottle. I did the same. We lifted our glasses and clicked rims. I knew he was only giving himself time to think, but I appreciated the companionable peg, and it was good, smoky Canadian.

He put his glass down. I saw he'd made up his mind. He turned and went to the windows overlooking the street. "Israel needs money and weapons," he said, his back to the room. "Small arms are problematic, still, but not the main issue. I'm talking about field artillery, crew-served machine guns, tanks. We need diesel, replacement parts, tools and dies. The industry for modern, mechanized war."

"And you're running on rubber bands and spit."

He turned around. "The choke point is financial," he told me. "If we had gold on deposit with the Federal Reserve, we could borrow against it, but for the moment, we're begging hat in hand for credit. In six months, the situation might have changed, but in six months, the state of Israel might not exist, if the Arabs drive us into the sea."

"So van Rensellaer's anti-Semitism isn't academic," I said.

Wolf went to a sideboard and unlocked it. He took out a package wrapped in oiled paper, the thickness of a telephone directory, a foot and a half long. He dropped it on the blotter of the desk with a solid, metallic thump.

I knew what it was. I could smell the Cosmoline.

"Open it," Wolf said.

I unwrapped the paper. It was an ugly thing, but it looked extremely functional. I picked it up. Maybe seven pounds.

"Based on the Sten gun," Wolf told me. "For its method of manufacture. Stamped receiver, forged barrel. Fires the 9mm Parabellum, from an open bolt. Six hundred rounds a minute, on full auto. Designed by a man named Uziel Gal. If we had the factory capacity, we could produce a hundred a day, and on the cheap."

I locked the bolt back. The recoil spring felt like a good twenty pounds, but the bolt moved like butter.

"Friends up in Hartford," he said, answering the question I hadn't asked him.

Hartford, Connecticut, was home to Colt. They made the gun I carried. I squeezed the grip safety and pinched the trigger, and the bolt slapped shut on the empty chamber. Ten rounds in a second, I thought. Like a water pistol with real bullets.

"You take my point," Wolf said.

I put the gun down, reluctantly. "I do," I said.

He spread his hands, inviting comment.

"Okay, let me see if I've got this right," I said. "Van Rensellaer can choke you in infancy, because his influence extends to a consortium of New York banks. Once they turn you down, you can't get financing from Switzerland or Hong Kong, for the simple reason that bankers don't make bad loans."

"We'd be blackballed."

"How can one man make that decision?"

"Let's say he's the swing vote. Elections have turned on less." Wolf shrugged. It seemed a gesture of habit, something he did for lack of an expressive vocabulary, the way another man might smile, reflexively, and not exactly mean it.

"And if you could catch him in an embarrassment—"

"It would be preferable if we swung his vote our way, yes."

"Better than arranging a happy accident," I said.

He gazed at me with what I took for placid candor. "Things have a way of redounding," he said.

"The shortest way between two points is a straight line."

"Perhaps."

"Then why haven't you had him killed?" I asked.

He smiled wolfishly. "That was my first thought," he told me. "I was second-guessed."

"We're of like minds, then," I said to him, "but neither of us is free to act according to our instincts."

"We accept discipline," he agreed.

"Grudgingly," I said.

He knew what I was suggesting. "I might trade you mine for yours," he said.

"Except that I don't want van Rensselaer dead."

"I'm willing to split the difference," Wolf said.

I picked up my whiskey glass again. There were two fingers still left in it.

"Absent friends," he said.

We clicked rims a second time.

Of course, I had no reason to want van Rensselaer dead, so far as I knew. And it would be awkward to explain to Dede. But if Wolf had been telling me the whole truth, or as much of it as he judged wise, van Rensselaer was a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Which didn't make him a murderer.

By the time I left the Israeli safe house, it was getting on toward noon. I went to Midtown, to the Horn & Hardart. Lunchtime, and close to Grand Central, it was a rendezvous point for my numbers runners. I already had a fistful of change from the cashier, and I doled out coins as they trickled in. It didn't bother me that they went straight for the Indian pudding and the Boston cream pie; I wasn't interested in the condition of their teeth. Judy, though, had sense enough to pick pot roast with a side of succotash. She made her sidekick Roger get American chop suey. She knew the value of a hot lunch.

I never thought of the automat as a marvel, but I suppose it was, from the number of visitors from out of town who made it a destination. To me, it was part of the climate, the weather of a place I knew. Of course it's gone now, like so much of the New York that I once inhabited.

They sat down with the thick china plates in front of them and tucked into their food. I gave her the chance to take the immedi-

ate edge off her hunger, but I suppose I was waiting in vain, metaphorically speaking. Judy's hunger wasn't physical—not in the sense of being satisfied by meat and potatoes.

It didn't take her long to inhale the pot roast.

"Anything of use?" I asked her, when she came up for air.

She began mopping up the pan gravy with a piece of buttered bread. She shrugged, still chewing, and cut her eyes at Roger.

I glanced over at him too.

He had his mouth full, as well, but that didn't stop him. The difference between the two of them was that Judy played her hand close to the vest until she needed to show her cards, but Roger wasn't as artful. He was the sort, man or boy, who turned the deck faceup on the table. His eagerness was all, and his attention to detail. It had an advantage, however. He gave everything equal emphasis. He didn't interpret, or leave one thing out at the expense of something else. He left it up to me to decide.

She'd worked only the three or four blocks south of Sutton Place, he reported. She did her business in empty doorways or vacant lots. The professionals had access to cheap hotels where the desk clerks took a piece of the action for an hour's use of their sheets, and the tough older whores had chased her off more than once. It was a buyer's market.

Something about it didn't sit right. "The older women, the prossies," I said to him, "they've likely got a cold-water flat they go home to, or a hotel room, anyway. The street kids, what do they have to call home?"

"The subway," Judy said.

"A hobo jungle, in the tunnels?"

She nodded.

"Find it," I said.

Judy and Roger exchanged a quick glance. They already knew where it was, I realized, but were reluctant to tell me.

"No harm's going to come to them, Jude," I said.

She said nothing, although her doubt was easy to read. I'd meant Maggie no harm either.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

I tried not to trade on my friendship with Johnny Darling. We came from different worlds. He was married now and recently a dad, no longer the devil-may-care boy of those reckless days we'd shared before the war. He carried fragments of Japanese shrapnel in one knee, too, from the Pacific, and the barely perceptible limp added to his gravity. Not that he gave himself airs. Oh, and there was *his* father, the so-called Black Cardinal, an outright market

monopolist who harked back to the robber barons of the Gilded Age. I'd foolishly made an enemy of him, and it was an injury he'd be unlikely to forgive.

Johnny wasn't cut from the same cloth. He was a democrat with a small D, or what you might call a natural aristocrat, one of a dwindling number.

We met at Jack Sharkey's later that afternoon.

"How's life been treating you, Mickey?" he asked.

"Not much, lately," I said.

We shook hands and took our seats at the bar. Both of us ordered Dewar's. It was a sentimental choice. In one of our previous lifetimes, we'd smuggled bootleg scotch in from Canada.

"Not a social occasion, I take it," he said.

"We're not social equals, Johnny," I said.

He started to dispute me, out of politeness, and then chose not to. He raised his drink, his expression inward.

"August van Rensellaer," I said.

His glass stopped halfway to his mouth.

"I see I've come to the right person," I said.

"What's your interest?"

"It's personal."

"Mine is financial. Or, say better, my father's is."

"Your dad's in bed with August van Rensellaer?"

"Figuratively speaking. But understand, Mickey, compared to the van Rensellaers, my family's *nouveau riche*." He shrugged his shoulders, ironically. "Not social equals."

I picked up my drink. "Here's to unequal partnerships," I said.

He smiled, genuinely, and we touched glasses.

"What about van Rensellaer, professionally?" I asked him.

"He makes money for his stockholders," he said.

"The public be damned," I said.

It was a famous quote of Jay Gould's. Johnny took it in good humor.

"It's an unhappy mischance, your father being involved," I remarked. "Given that there's bad blood between us already, I'd sooner not cross him a second time."

"That might be, ah, impolitic," Johnny said. "I'd hesitate to call attention to myself, were I you."

"Could be unavoidable."

"Then again, if this personal matter were to have adverse *financial* consequences for the van Rensellaers—" He left the sentence unfinished.

I thought I understood his meaning. "Your father might see advantage in it," I suggested.

"Two birds with one stone," he said.

I didn't much care whether or not I got back into the Black Cardinal's good graces, but it had a certain symmetry.

"What's all this in aid of, Mickey?" Johnny asked me.

"Jews," I said.

He raised his eyebrows.

"Jews. Yids. Sheenies. You got a problem with it?"

"Quit horsing me around," he said, evenly. "Tell me what's going on."

"Money and guns for Israel. Van Rensselaer's in a position to queer the lending policies of the major New York banks."

"He would be," Johnny said. "And he would if he could."

"Apparently, he can."

"Isn't that the damndest thing," he muttered.

"Men with money make the rules?"

Johnny laughed. "Since when did you become a Red? No. I meant this whole crazy notion of some secret enterprise, with Jewish capital pulling strings behind the scenes, using Gentiles for front men, when Israel's going hat in hand to survive."

"What's your own attitude toward Jews, Johnny?"

He stared at me. "I had Jews in my outfit in the Pacific," he said. "We served alongside *Negroes*, for Christ's sake."

"What's your point?" I asked.

"Everybody bleeds the same color," he said, primly.

"How about your father?"

He made a dismissive gesture. "My father's a creature of his class," he said. "He's anti-Semitic by reflex. Does he do business with Jews? Of course. He'd do business with Hitler."

He probably had, but I didn't say so.

"It's about profits, Mickey," Johnny said. "It's not about personal prejudice or social distinctions."

I'd never seen Johnny squirm. I didn't like seeing it now. "Then what's van Rensselaer's game?" I asked.

"Who the hell knows? Maybe he just doesn't need the money. Or he's fixated. It's irrational."

"Could be," I said. "Or he's in it for bigger stakes."

"What've you got on him, Mickey?"

"Sex with an underage girl, who then turned up dead."

I watched him fold it over in his mind. "Nope," he said. "One thing follows another. Doesn't mean the first thing caused the second."

"I didn't say it did."

"You're making a connection, though."

"One thing happens, and then something else happens, or happens to be part of the mix, and *then* something else happens," I

said. "Guy gets his knob polished, and a girl gets killed. That's all I have. Let's call it the *first* thing, and the *third* thing. I missed out on the second act."

I had him interested, I could see that, but maybe I'd made a mistake bringing Johnny into the equation because I didn't know if he was disinterested. It hadn't occurred to me that he might have his own horse in the race.

"We've always been frank with one another," I said. "If you've got reason to hold out on me now, all you have to tell me is that you've got a reason. I don't need to know what it is."

"You've put me in a tough spot," he said.

"When did I ever betray a confidence?" I asked him. "Yours or anybody else's?"

"We've never had a conflict of interest," he said.

"Let's say your father's made common cause with August van Rensselaer's banking combine. Let's say it's a conspiracy, in violation of the laws against restraint of trade. Let's further say it's simply a scheme to cheat investors."

"For the sake of argument," Johnny said, warily.

"I don't care," I said. "If you're robbing widows and orphans, that's between you and your conscience, or between you and God. My guess is that if it were widows and orphans, or war vets, you would have already stepped in. Which tells me it's players with a serious bankroll, real money. Money they're equipped to risk."

"Nobody can afford to lose money," he said.

"Some people lose money, and they lose their homes," I said to him. "Some people lose money, they have to sell the yacht."

"You *are* going Red," he said, smiling.

"Two questions. If van Rensselaer's end of the partnership collapses, does your father sink or swim?"

"If van Rensselaer sinks, my father treads water. He'll be in position to take a controlling interest. Second question."

"Follows on the first. Why hasn't your father just cut van Rensselaer's throat?"

"Old money, new money," Johnny said. "It's a negotiation."

I nodded. A place at the table.

"It is about social distinctions, Mickey," he said.

"And no Irish need apply," I said.

He drew back, offended, and then realized he wasn't the one offended.

I waved my hand at him. "Jesus, boyo, you're too sensitive to imagined slights."

"Which one of us should be embarrassed?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Leave that be," I said. "Riddle me this instead. Why is August van Rensselaer dead set on putting the kibosh on bank loans to Israel?"

"He doesn't want his daughter marrying a Jewboy."

"How many Jewboys would she have the opportunity to meet? How many darkies, if they weren't carrying her luggage? How many wetbacks, or a plain and simple Catholic? How about a damn Chinaman? You're barking up the wrong tree, Johnny. You've said it yourself. It's all about profits, and devil take the hindmost."

"No," Johnny said. "It's about tribes, Mickey."

That, I well understood, to my sorrow.

The thing is, in New York it's *all* tribal. Tammany and the Mafia, native born and immigrant, the privileged and the derelict. The hierarchy of neighborhoods, Jews on the Lower East Side, Italians in the Village, Negroes up in Harlem. The unions, the cops, Freemasons and Jehovah's Witnesses. Every one of them with their hand out and a mouthful of much obliged.

So it should come as no surprise that a gang of forsaken children would jungle up in some little-used section of the IRT. Lexington Ave. has the heaviest ridership of any route in the metropolitan transit web, and when the platforms were lengthened to accommodate trains with ten cars, some smaller intermediate stations were abandoned. Eighteenth Street, between Union Square and Twenty-third, for one, was closed down in late '48, and the stop between Fifty-first and Fifty-ninth had been shuttered only a few months later, this past February. The subway was just a part of it, of course. Beneath the pavement, the city is a maze of service levels that go sixty feet down or more. Sewers and aqueducts, steam tunnels and electrical, the New York Central tracks to upstate, gas lines, cast-iron water pipes to feed the fire hydrants, an entire arterial geography, a secret circulatory system known to urban engineers and sandhogs, but much of it unmapped or forgotten, lost to living memory, the original plans disintegrating in some dust-covered file cabinet, like papyrus.

Judy appointed herself my guide to the underworld.

We started, oddly enough, at the Waldorf-Astoria, where Dede and I had met only two days before, but Judy didn't take me to the lobby entrance on Park. We went around the corner onto East Fiftieth. Halfway along the block, access ramps went down to the basement. There was a guard shack at street level. Judy gave the guy a wave and walked right past him, but me, he gave the fish-eye and stepped out to block my path. He was an older man, over-

weight, in an ill-fitting uniform, a time clock on a shoulder strap, and a .38 revolver dragging down the right side of his garrison belt. I made him for a retired harness bull, hoping to catch his second wind. I slipped him a folded twenty and he let me pass, however ungraciously.

Below ground, in the bowels of the building, there was a cavernous service area, big enough for tractor-trailer rigs to maneuver around in, and there were half a dozen backed up to the loading docks. Some of them were refrigerated trucks, with generators over the cab, their engines idling, and in spite of the high ceiling, the air was foul with diesel fumes. Judy scrambled up onto one of the loading docks and threaded her way through the traffic, not waiting to see how closely I could keep up with her. It was as busy as the sidewalks in the garment district, everybody in motion, pushing racks of hanging meat and stacking crates of iced seafood, checking in pallets of canned goods, dollying boxes of fresh produce and hundred-pound bags of pastry flour. Linens, glassware, soap and bath salts, shoe polish, candlesticks, light bulbs, matchbooks embossed with the Waldorf crest, mints for the pillow slips when the maids turned down your bedclothes at night. The entire enterprise seen from behind the curtain, the effort that made the hotel services seem effortless.

Twenty or thirty paces out in front of me, Judy ducked into a stairwell. I followed her down. Concrete treads, an iron handrail made from plumbing pipe. My footsteps echoed. I found myself in a further subbasement, the laundry. Like the other big New York hotels, the Waldorf did its own wash. If you were a guest, you could get a suit dry-cleaned on the premises, or a shirt ironed, but the real work involved the thousands of sheets and towels, napkins and aprons, kitchen whites and dishrags. It was a factory operation, steamy, hot, and close. And enormous.

Here, too, an unspoken question was answered. Judy moved through the environment unchallenged. The rent-a-cop on the ramp hadn't given her a second glance. The guys on the loading docks had let her slip past with easy familiarity. In the laundry, I saw why. It was mostly women, and of every age, but there was an Italian gal of around fifty who was obviously the supervisor. She handed Judy a package, a thick manila envelope, and gave her a quick, affectionate cuff as the girl slithered by. Policy bets. They all played the numbers on a daily basis. Judy collected, and made the payouts. She was the next best thing to invisible. Or, say better, she was like a useful pet, one of a litter of feral kittens. She'd turned out to be a good mouser, and you left well enough alone.

We went down yet another stairwell. This one led to the boiler rooms, three floors below street level, where stokers fed coal-fired furnaces. Here the stoop labor was done by Negroes, bare chested and glistening with sweat. They wore bandannas across the lower half of their faces, like bandits, to protect them from inhaling the coal dust that hung everywhere in the air they breathed, but the soot caked on their damp skin, dull as cast iron. They, too, let Judy pass without comment, although I drew their wary gaze.

These, of course, were only the anterooms to Hades.

Judy led me inside.

In this day and age, coal deliveries were made by truck. The furnaces in the bottom basement of the Waldorf provided steam heat and hot water to a city block, and went through half a ton of coal a day, spilling out of gravity-fed chutes. But before the war, when the hotel was first built, it had been more practical to devise a different system, an underground shuttle from the freight yards. Long out of use, the abandoned railway line was narrow-gauge to accommodate smaller coal cars, which were then unloaded by hand. The original entry had been double doors, with a span of track passing underneath them, but they were long since rusted shut, the hinges corroded. Judy knew a different way, an old maintenance access panel, out of sight. She slid it aside and skinnied behind it. I could barely squeeze my shoulders through. It took some effort. And once in, there wasn't nearly enough headroom for me to stand upright. I had to move forward in a crouch, knees against my chest.

It was essentially a crawl space, and it opened up after a few yards, giving out onto the old coal-shuttle spur. We were close enough to the Lexington Avenue IRT to hear the wheels of the trains grinding against the rails, but it was tricky, the way sound traveled in the tunnels. It seemed to come from every direction, and I'd already lost mine, but Judy knew the way, and beckoned me after her.

We went deeper into the vaulted tunnels.

It felt dark and close, although the overhead was high enough to let trains pass. It smelled of earth, but metallic, as well, and overheated, which I hadn't expected. The air felt charged, with static or ozone. The noise level was intense, racketing in the underground space, a constant rumble, vibrating in your skull, the clatter of the cars, the shriek of steel on steel where the wheels met the rails, the clank of switches and the hiss of brakes. I guess you got used to it, the more time you spent down there, transit workers or squatters, but it was a tiresome erosion of your wits, unceasing, metronomic.

Judy took a turning. Following her, the noise abated slightly. We were now in a utility corridor, steam pipes leaking hot vapor and electrical conduits as big around as man's waist. There were blue bulbs, protected by wire mesh, set in niches in the wall about every fifteen feet, and the half-light was chilly, giving my bare hands a ghostly, fluorescent cast, although the passage itself was clammy and hot, the curved walls sweating condensation.

I wasn't sure of the distance, but it felt like a few hundred yards before we came out at the far end into what seemed like an older set of tunnels. The rails were tarnished, not shiny, and everything smelled of disuse. Fifty-first Street is a transfer stop, local to express for the Lexington line, and a change of platforms for the Eighth Avenue local to Queens. I was disoriented, but I thought we might actually have come as far as Fifty-third. Trains groaned on the levels above us, and chips of rust filtered down from overhead. There was only ambient light, no blue bulbs or switching signals. It wasn't entirely dark, once your eyes adjusted, but it was all twilight shadows, a permanent dusk, muted and ashen.

Judy stopped abruptly, motioning me to stillness. There was something canine in her posture, alert as a dog scenting something on the wind, or hearing a frequency inaudible to the human ear. I couldn't tell what she'd felt. I was deaf and blind, my senses smothered by the close, stifling darkness, the heat, the pressure of background noise. She glanced to her right, and I looked where she was looking. There was a slight movement, a shadow against shadows. It was a Norway rat the size of a small corgi. He watched us indifferently for a moment and then slid away. We were neither live prey nor carrion.

Judy signaled me to follow her lead again.

A few hundred yards down the tracks, she glanced back, and then shuffled a step to her right, slipping sideways between two vertical supports, and vanished. I was only ten feet behind her, but she simply evaporated, like a raindrop on hot pavement, and when I drew even with the columns, I couldn't see where she'd gone. Nor could I see any sign that indicated a passage or an exit, but then I noticed a mark, in bright orange chalk or crayon, the kind of hieroglyphic bums and gandydancers use to let each other know if a yard bull is a bully, or if it's safe. I sucked up my gut and eased between the stanchions, the buttons of my jacket scraping the corroded metal. It was a tight fit for a grown man. And then I saw I'd have to get down on my hands and knees to go after her. A rough opening had been hacked into the bulkhead, but it was only big enough to admit a girl of Judy's build, not some two hundred pound Irish thug with bad wind and

joints that were no longer elastic. I worked my way through, nonetheless, my trousers and elbows catching on the rough edges of the concrete, and I felt fabric tear. Somebody was going to owe me a new suit when all was said and done. I got to my feet again, out of breath.

It was a lateral transition into another set of vaulted subway tunnels, unused, but in this case, unfinished. It must have been dug and then abandoned. The roadbed had been graded, but no track had ever been laid. How many secret underground projects still lay beneath the streets of New York, orphaned and unremembered? I wondered.

Judy stood stock-still. All around us was evidence of a hasty departure, disordered sleeping bags and blankets, cartons and corrugated cardboard, personal items discarded, toothbrushes and teddy bears. I realized we were being watched, but this time it wasn't a rat. It was a child, a boy of eight or so, his eyes glittering. Judy coaxed him out of his hiding place, but his glance in my direction was full of apprehension, so I stayed where I was.

They squatted down next to each other, heads together, for all the world like two kids playing jacks. Both of them kept looking over each other's shoulders, or glancing back over their own, keeping a weather eye out. I took up station downwind, so to speak, trying not to call attention to myself. It still took Judy a while to tease the story out of him.

She came over. "Cops," she told me.

"Cops, who?" I asked, swinging around.

"Suits, uniforms."

"So some of them were plainclothes?"

"The kid can smell copper, uniformed or not," she said.

It figured to be Gallagher. "What happened?" I asked her.

"They moved in, rounded them up, and cleared them out," she said, waving a hand at the obvious signs of abandonment.

"How did they find the place?"

She gave me an up-from-under look.

"No." I shook my head. "We didn't lead them here, Judy. O'Toole couldn't get his fat ass through the cracks you took me through, and Gallagher wouldn't soil his suit. They had to come in from a different direction."

She went over to the boy again and they talked.

Judy swung back. "From the East River side," she said.

"Where are we?" I asked. "Close to Grand Central?"

She shook her head. "East of Lex, below Forty-seventh."

I was completely turned around. I thought we'd been moving north, or south, but we'd been going crosstown.

"He can show us the way," Judy said.

I took a few steps in the boy's direction, keeping my hands behind my back. He moved away from me, warily, staying out of reach.

"My name's Mickey Counihan," I told him, introducing myself as if to an adult. "Judy will tell you the last thing I'd choose would be to rat you out to the cops or the youth wardens, but we pay each other's tariff. Point us the way they went."

"What's in it for me?" he asked, tilting his chin up.

I grinned. "A hot meal, a safe bed, and a cuff on the back of your head, you scut," I told him.

He cut his eyes at Judy.

She shrugged, as if to say I hadn't yet played her false.

The kid spat in his hand and stepped forward, and we shook on it, like Irish livestock buyers at a country market town.

"What do I call you?" I asked.

"Billy," he said.

"Billy the Kid?" I suggested.

He smiled.

I pointed. "Get on with you," I said.

On we went.

I found it odd, the distance you were able to cover below ground. I'd have thought the opposite, but we weren't walking the grid of streets and avenues. It still came as a surprise to me, where Billy led us, although I should have guessed.

The old graded roadbed curved, and then straightened, and then curved again. Maybe half a mile, as the crow flies? It was hard to judge. Then the two kids stopped, alert to some new signal. I caught it, too, the touch of a cool breeze, not the fetid air of the tunnels, but it carried the smell of the river, damp and nearby, an oily scent, sweet with decay.

I'd been content to follow, thus far, because the two of them were familiar with the secret byways, as if they were playing a game of Chutes and Ladders, but now I took over the lead. The breeze freshened as we edged forward, and up ahead I made out a lighter spot in the gloom. It flickered like a candle, but as we got closer, I realized it was the flare of an oxyacetylene torch. I raised a hand, and Judy and Billy went still behind me. I worked my way into a better position, moving up behind a corroded stanchion.

It was a maintenance crew, four men. They were wrestling steel plates into place, and riveting them together to block off access to the tunnel behind me.

I stepped out from cover and motioned the kids to follow in my wake.

The first of the crew to notice me reacted with a terrified double take, and slapped the shoulder of the man in front of him. I must have looked a sight, hatless, my trousers torn, the jacket of my suit smeared with grease and rust.

I adopted a jaunty air. "Chased these scamps up and down and all around," I said. I took each of them by the ear, not playfully, and shoved them past the barricade. Judy played her part, whining aggrievedly. Billy didn't realize he was supposed to be who he was, only more so, and tried to twist away. I bit down harder with my thumb and forefinger. Judy levered out with her left leg and popped him with her heel, just below the knee.

"Who's up top?" I asked the riveting crew.

They took me for police, as I'd hoped they would.

"Lieutenant of detectives," the guy with the torch told me. "Big fella, almost your size, wearing a good suit."

"And a lard-ass sergeant with a long line of mouth," one of the other guys put in.

Gallagher and O'Toole. How not?

I started to thank them, but I realized it would be out of character. Cops don't thank anybody. What the subway crew expected of me was no more than I gave them. "Get out of my damn way, then," I said, my manners as bad as possible.

I ramrodded the kids past.

"The cheaper the clothes, the tougher they talk," I heard the guy with the torch say. It didn't bother me. I'd heard the same patter before.

"Keep moving," I muttered to Judy and Billy. I'd let go of her, and she took the opportunity to kick Billy again.

"Cut it out," he said to her.

"Cut it out, yourself," I said, letting go of his earlobe.

"That hurt," he complained.

"You don't know when you've got it good," I said. I looked at Judy. "Billy the Kid's your responsibility," I told her.

Judy rolled her eyes.

"No," I said. "Get him gone. Look ahead."

She did, and saw what I'd seen.

There was a ragged hole at the end the tunnel, where earth-moving equipment had torn into the vaulted underground cavern and exposed the abandoned subway line, like breaking open a hive of bees. It was the excavation for the UN dig.

"They scattered them like birds," I said to her.

"It wasn't our fault?" she asked.

"No," I told her. "It was an accident. Fortunes of war."

She didn't entirely trust me, that was evident.

"I'm going out into the light," I said. "But once I get in the clear, the two of you skedaddle."

She understood. "You going to be okay, Mickey?" she asked.

"Not hardly," I said.

"Meet you in the sweet by-and-by," Judy said.

"Get lost," I told her.

She did, but she did it without haste, so as not to call any undue attention to herself. And she took the kid along with her. They were slippery bastards. They'd had enough practice.

Me, a different story. I ducked past the plywood hoardings that had been erected to shroud the subway tunnels, and stepped out again into the sucking mud. I saw Judy and Billy scramble away, vagabonds on the streets, fugitives below ground, adapting for their own survival.

The lights hit me. I was an understudy filling in for the lead actor, not knowing my lines. The hot, piercing glow pinned me like a butterfly.

"Mickey." It was Gallagher, calling down.

He didn't help me, he let me struggle, but when I managed to get to the lip of the trench, he held out a hand, and dragged me up the last few feet.

O'Toole stood back, watching me with vengeful eyes.

"You keep turning up, boyo, like a bad penny," Gallagher said. "How d'ye come to be here? Better question yet, why were you in the subway tunnels in the first place?"

"Same as you, Pat," I said. "Chasing runaways."

"You don't turn your kids out, Mickey," he said. "What are you about?"

"Answering to my own conscience," I said.

Gallagher stepped in close, so we were standing shoulder to shoulder. "The girl died of a broken neck," he murmured.

I nodded. "One of her clients?"

"Most like," he said.

I looked past him. August van Rensellaer stood ten yards away, at the edge of the incline, but in the shadows, not in the light. Gallagher didn't have to follow my gaze.

"I'd be guessing, mind you," Gallagher said, still speaking under his breath. "Yank my Doodle, it's a dandy."

"My first question would be how he came to be here, Pat," I said. "How much is he paying for your protection?"

"Well, now, Mickey, those kids have proved to be a nuisance and an eyesore, and a detriment to the neighborhood."

"So a complaint from a concerned and well-connected citizen would encourage you to clean house."

"We serve at the public's pleasure," he said.

"You feed at the public trough," I told him.

"Hell," Gallagher said. He waved a hand at van Rensellaer. "You can't pin the killing on him. Could have been anybody."

"Not just anybody was scared enough to call in his markers, and get a bent cop on the case."

He smiled. "Which isn't evidence. It's simple dislike for the man, on your part."

"I doubt if he's a likeable man," I said.

Gallagher stepped back. "You're welcome to talk to him," he said. "Be circumspect, if it's in your nature." He grinned. "But the more threatened he is, the better I like it."

The more money in his pocket, he meant. I walked over to van Rensellaer, the loose earth sucking at my shoes. He glanced at me, recognized that I was of no importance, and looked away.

"The kids in the tunnels," I said. "They live there because they have nowhere else, and they work the streets out of necessity. They're victims almost by design."

He didn't give me a second glance. "I don't believe I know you," he said, dismissively.

"No," I said. I started to turn away, discouraged, but I thought about the look Judy might give me later, and turned around again. "I know your wife," I said. "I knew her when she was a whore."

"She's still a whore," he said. "But her price went up."

A vein began throbbing in my temple. "Her price is her own dignity," I said to him.

He condescended to make eye contact with me. "Were you the lowest bidder?" he asked.

I blinked back my anger. My temples were about to burst.

"Or did you offer rescue?" van Rensellaer asked, smiling.

I shifted my weight and kicked the earth out from under his left foot. Off-balance, he tumbled over the edge. I threw myself after him into the trench, dirt and loose stones getting up my sleeves. "Goddamn it," Gallagher shouted, waving O'Toole and the uniforms in.

I rolled over on top of van Rensellaer, straddling his lower body, and hit him once hard, on the bridge of the nose. I felt the bones in his face break, and the knuckles in my hand.

I lifted him off the ground, shaking him by his shirtfront. "You bastard," I said. "You're not safe from me."

His eyes were wide and frightened, but uncomprehending.

I shook him again. "I'll kill you, Augie," I said, my face inches from his. "That's a promise you can take to the bank."

O'Toole scrambled down the slope and hauled me back.

The uniforms picked van Rensellaer up and dusted him off. He was staring at me, blood leaking out his nose, but he didn't say anything. I took it to mean he understood I'd meant exactly what I told him.

I shrugged out of O'Toole's grip.

He stayed behind me, oddly passive, and made no move to cuff me. I looked up at Gallagher, standing at the edge of the trench. He shook his head, but it wasn't in disappointment. He was a man who knew the usefulness of hate.

So the Black Cardinal, Johnny's father, went unsatisfied. He would have benefited from van Rensellaer's embarrassment, if it had turned out to be financial, not personal. But the August van Rensellaers of this world have a habit of shrugging off scandal. It's not simply the brute power of their money; it has more to do with the imperviousness their money breeds.

"So there's no justice for her death?" Dede asked me.

"There's no retribution," I said.

I didn't tell her she might be sleeping with the man who'd murdered Maggie. Justice has a way of seeking its own level. Dede had asked me to look after the girl, and I was only able to lay Maggie's ghost to rest. An unresolved conclusion.

Judy was likewise less than happy. I was turning out to be unlucky with women.

"Social Services has the lot of them," she said.

"They'll be back on the streets in a week," I said.

She eyed me leerily.

"Easy pickings, we recruit the ones with promise."

Judy studied on it, and grinned. "Okay," she agreed.

And a package came, a couple of days later. No return address, no card. It was a bottle of Canadian rye. I knew that the bank loans to Israel had been approved.

I cracked the bottle and poured myself a couple of fingers. I inhaled the scent. Good, smoky stuff.

Absent friends, I thought. I tipped back the glass. 🍷

THE FOUR CASTLES

TERENCE FAHERTY

"Strangers are like wild animals. They may look interesting, but they make lousy pets."

Julia Caden, a petite woman with wide, blue eyes, smiled, both because her husband David's remark was, for him, witty and because she was trying to agree with him as often as possible. Their trip to Scotland was a celebration of their twenty-five years of marriage, but it was also their conscious attempt to rediscover the common ground they felt they had lost.

"But she is interesting" was all the rebuttal Julia would allow herself.

The interesting stranger was an auburn-haired young woman they had encountered at their first stop in Scotland, Sterling Castle. They'd chosen Sterling as a good place to start their week because it was an easy drive from the Glasgow airport. It also had a military museum, which interested David. For Julia, the castle's interest lay in its romantic past. Mary, Queen of Scots, had been crowned there as an infant, and the towering Wallace Monument was visible in the distance from the castle's stone ramparts.

The Cadens had spotted the woman as they'd climbed the castle's sloping car park. She had been standing beneath Robert the Bruce's stern statue and had returned the couple's gaze for a moment before looking away.

"Watching for someone," Julia had said, focusing on just one of the impressions she had received. The others had been that the woman was pale, attractive, and somehow lost. Then David, who was dark, broad-shouldered, and never lost, had drawn her back with his warning about strangers, and they'd started their self-guided tour.

Much of the older portion of the castle was under repair. They moved from one scaffolded space to another, reading about what the rooms had looked like after the prior renovations and what they would look like after the current ones.

"Just our luck to be here this century," David remarked.

It was a relief to step out onto the battlements and regain the

view of the beautiful valley and the Wallace tower beyond. And there, on a paved walk beneath the wall on which they stood, was the young woman again, a small figure in the foreground that greatly added to the vista's interest for Julia.

"She's an American, did you notice?" Julia said.

"Who?" David asked, and then, "Oh. What makes you think so?"

"She was wearing a University of Delaware windbreaker." Delaware was two states away from their own New Jersey, but from across an ocean it seemed to Julia to be part of the same neighborhood. Which made the young woman a neighbor and possibly a neighbor in some kind of difficulty.

"That doesn't mean she's an American," David countered. "Maybe some American gave it to her."

"Maybe the person she came here to meet," Julia said. "Maybe they parted a year ago today and promised to meet again under that statue."

David must have recognized the echo of her favorite movie. He said, "Don't you mean six months later at the top of the Empire State Building?"

"I wonder why he didn't show up," Julia mused, leaning over the parapet to watch the stranger disappear around a curve in the walk.

Her husband tugged on her arm. "Must have found another windbreaker," he said.

II

That night, in the crossroads town of Callander, the Cadens had their anniversary dinner. They were seated in the octagonal dining room that extended from the side of the old manor house that was their hotel. Only four of the other tables were occupied, each in its own corner of the big room. Julia alternately had the sense that they were eating alone and that they were Peeping Toms, intruding on the privacy of the other diners.

When she mentioned this last feeling to her husband, he said, "Think of them as strangers you can make up stories about."

He seemed to Julia to regret this remark as soon as he'd made it. Because it was almost unkind, she decided, and so came near to violating their anniversary truce.

"I'm sorry for going on about the woman in the castle," she said, "but I couldn't help feeling that something was wrong there."

"Something's wrong here," David replied. "Every course has been brought in by a different server. How many could this place have? And how many am I supposed to tip?"

"Didn't you feel that?" Julia persisted. "Not necessarily that a tragedy had happened but that one was going to happen?"

David sighed so loudly that the German couple at the nearest table turned to look. Julia quickly switched to a more appropriate topic: how they'd first met. David had been a traveling salesman, then as now, and she'd been a receptionist at one of his regular stops.

"You should have heard the stories I made up about you," she said as a peace offering.

It evidently worked because David raised his glass to her. "They couldn't have been better than what actually happened to me."

Later, when Julia emerged from their *en suite* bathroom in a carefully selected negligee, she found David snoring away. They should have skipped the brandies in the hotel's conservatory, she thought, or waited to have their special dinner until after the jet lag had worn off.

She switched on her reading light and picked up *Jane Eyre*, the old favorite that she'd decided to reread on the trip. No better handbook existed, in her opinion, for maintaining hope in a troubled relationship. Then she saw on her nightstand the pamphlet she'd purchased in the Sterling Castle gift shop, *A Brief Guide to the Life and Landmarks of Mary, Queen of Scots*. She traded the Brontë for the booklet and settled in to read.

She'd been attracted to the pamphlet's cover, a photograph of Sterling Castle on just the kind of sunny day they'd had. She opened now to the frontispiece and found a color reproduction of a portrait of Queen Mary I. Julia noticed how the subject's pale skin glowed against a dark blue dress and a darker background. Then her eye moved to the queen's hair. She felt she'd seen that hair recently and then remembered the young woman from the University of Delaware, also pale and beautiful. The stranger and the doomed queen shared the same striking shade of auburn.

III

The next day the Cadens' itinerary, worked out weeks in advance and filed in duplicate at each of their offices, called for them to drive around Loch Lomond. They awoke to a low overcast and a promise of rain but set out anyway, against the advice of the hotel staff.

"If we don't stick to the plan, we don't have a plan," David said as the first raindrops fell on the windshield of their rented Renault. "Besides, a lake's always wet."

On the drive to Balloch, Julia related some of what she'd read of Mary, Queen of Scots, further condensing the pamphlet's condensation.

"She was born in 1542, crowned queen when she was only nine months old, and betrothed when she was five to the Dauphin of France. She became Queen of France when he succeeded to the throne as François II in 1559."

"So she was also Mary, Queen of Frenchmen," David said, glowering upward at the now steady rain. "This is what you want on a vacation, the chance to figure out how your car's high-speed wipers work."

"When François died, she returned to Scotland. That was in 1560. Elizabeth I of England didn't like having her that close, since Mary's claim to the English throne was as good as hers. She liked it even less when Mary married Lord Darnley, an English nobleman with royal blood."

"So Elizabeth had her head chopped off. I think I saw this part in a movie."

"Not yet. First Darnley tried to take over. When he got himself blown up, she fell in with an adventurer named Bothwell, who locked her away and may have raped her."

"Men are beasts," David said. "Sorry."

"Mary escaped to England, which was a mistake. Elizabeth arranged to have her held prisoner in a remote castle until she could think of an excuse to have her executed. That finally happened in 1587. So women can be beasts too."

It was another of her olive branches. David failed to grasp it, having spotted familiar lights through what was now a downpour.

"There's a McDonald's. Thank god for civilization. I'm stopping for coffee."

They drank the last of that coffee on the pebbly shore of the famous loch. The patter of rain on the hood of her jacket had Julia flashing back to Girl Scout camping trips. The lake was a dull slate gray that merged in the distance with a mist that merged in turn with the lowering sky.

"Believe it or not," David said, "there's a mountain right over there. Ben Lomond. It's got snow on the top and everything."

He held their guidebook, opened to a picture of the white peak, at arm's length before them.

"Oooh," Julia said. And, "Ahhh."

Laughing, they retreated to the car.

After a return to Callander for lunch and dry clothes, they set out again, still keeping to their itinerary, since their next goal was

nearer to hand and well roofed. It was another castle, Doune, near the town of the same name.

Julia's initial impression was that Doune Castle was as dark and forbidding as the sky. She warmed to the place when she learned in the ticket office that Mary, Queen of Scots, had stayed there, in an apartment that was open to the public.

But the rooms disappointed her all over again, being bare stone with small windows and a crude fireplace. David took one quick look and descended again to photograph the great hall. Julia lingered, noticing belatedly the paneled ceiling, the apartment's only trace of elegance. Then, after examining a tiny sleeping compartment, she struck her head on the lintel of its low doorway. She saw stars and thought for a moment that she might faint. With difficulty, she reached the staircase beyond the apartment, intending to go down in search of sympathy. Before she could, a breath of cool air, coming to her from above, partially cleared her head. She climbed in search of more of that air and found herself on a stone walkway that followed the outline of the castle's roof.

She also found that she was not alone. At one corner of the walk stood the young woman from Sterling. She had been up there for some little while to judge by her windbreaker, black with wet, and by her streaming hair.

When the woman noticed Julia, her expression was instantly angry. Julia felt, as she had in the dining room the evening before, that she was intruding on someone else's experience. Still, she was unwilling to leave a person she considered troubled alone and so near to the edge of the tower. Smiling, she moved to the opposite corner of the roof, leaned against a tall stone, and pretended to admire a field of cows.

Some time later, she heard David calling her name, and was surprised to find that she'd closed her eyes. She looked around for the auburn-haired woman, even checking the bright green lawn far below. The stranger was nowhere in sight.

When David found her, she explained about her head, now cold and wet as well as sore, and he led her by the hand down the winding stairs.

"Did you see her?" Julia asked as they descended, step by careful step.

"Who?"

"The woman from Sterling. She was there on the roof. You must have passed her on your way up."

"Are you kidding? You couldn't pass a broomstick on this staircase."

"Then she must have stopped somewhere on the way down." Together they looked in at every room they passed but saw no one.

IV

"You don't really think she is Mary, Queen of Scots, do you? Reincarnated or something? You didn't hit your head that hard, I hope."

The concerned questioner was a woman with an Irish name, Kay O'Brien, but dark, Mediterranean features. She and her husband Charley were having a late breakfast with Julia and David at the Cadens' new hotel in Dunfermline, prior to a day of exploring in nearby Edinburgh, where the O'Briens lived.

"Of course not," Julia said, resisting the temptation to admit her wilder imaginings. "I think she's obsessed with Mary."

"Because she's had some similar trouble in her own life," Kay said to show she'd been paying attention. She dropped her voice before adding, "trouble with men."

She needn't have bothered whispering. Though seated at the same table, the husbands were lost in a discussion of their mutual employer and the challenges of their respective sales territories, David's, which was growing, and Charley's, which was shrinking.

"Yesterday, we were scheduled to visit the palace of Linlithgow," Julia said. "That's where Mary was born. I was sure we'd see the woman there and I'd have a chance to talk with her."

"Assuming she's hitting all the Mary sites in the same order you are," Kay said doubtfully.

"We'll never know. David threw out our itinerary. He said wet castles were too dangerous. I told him I hadn't slipped, I'd hit my head, and besides, Linlithgow was a palace, not a castle, but he'd made up his mind. He said a change of plan might change our weather luck."

"Which it did," Kay said.

Julia was forced to agree. The drive north to Aberfeldy had been accompanied by the familiar beat of the Renault's windshield wipers. But when they'd emerged from their tour of the town's famous distillery, the sun was out. It had stayed out during their lunch in a remote inn, and the drive down to Dunfermline through hills covered with heather, its purple faded but still beautiful.

Julia glanced toward the men's end of the breakfast table. The husbands were now discussing their upcoming round of golf at St.

Andrews, Charley scratching his bald head with both hands in his excitement.

She said, "I've got another chance today. In Edinburgh. Mary had a child at the castle there."

"It's a big castle," Kay said, doubtful again. "And how do you know she wasn't there yesterday and in Linlithgow today? Or one of the other Mary landmarks? There's Holyrood Palace. That's also in Edinburgh. And Inchmahome Priory, over near where you were staying in Callander. They hid Mary there when she was little and Henry VIII was after her."

Julia pushed her plate away. "How on earth do you know that?"

"Since Charley talked me into moving over here from New Jersey, the kids and I have become professional tourists. If some old guy in a kilt left one stone on top of another, we've paid to see them.

"All I'm saying is, even if everything you're thinking is true, even if this woman is obsessed with Mary, she could be in any, one of a dozen different places on any given day. You could waste your whole vacation hunting for her."

"If I'm meant to find her, I will," Julia said. "And I feel like I'm meant to."

The two couples took the train into the heart of Edinburgh, crossing the famous Firth of Forth Bridge, and climbed on foot to the Royal Mile, the ancient street that led upward to the castle. The street was lined with shops and restaurants that served the tourist trade, and their business was brisk.

Stops at St. Giles to see the Thistle Chapel and at a tobacconist to buy Cuban cigars for the upcoming St. Andrews round delayed them. It was midday when they reached the castle's forecourt, where they were greeted by rows of idling tour buses. Julia saw then that Kay's description of the place had been accurate. Sterling Castle had been more of a complex than a single building. Edinburgh Castle was larger still, a walled town whose streets continued to climb the hill.

Once past the choke-point gate, the foursome separated, the men going in search of the armory while the wives wandered in the direction of St. Margaret's Chapel, Julia scanning the crowd as they walked.

"You can see now what I meant," Kay said. "There are just too many people up here. I can't blame them either. I've never been here on a nicer day. Look at the sky. It's almost the same shade of blue as the estuary."

She paused to photograph the meeting of that sea and sky on

the horizon. Julia, a few steps ahead, felt her heart racing, even as she told herself that she hadn't a prayer of spotting one auburn head in that crush.

But then she did spot it. The woman from Sterling and Doune was standing near an outcropping of rock at the base of the chapel, staring upward at the sky. Julia took a step toward her and stopped, suddenly remembering the woman's anger when her lonely vigil at Doune had been interrupted.

The warning memory came too late. The stranger looked down from the sky and met Julia's gaze, as directly as though Julia had called to her. She reacted as she had at Doune, with sudden rage. She rushed across the cobblestones at Julia, causing startled tourists to jump left and right.

Julia forgot her well-planned approach, her remarks about Delaware and touring that would lead in safe half-steps to more personal issues. She wanted to lose herself in the line waiting to enter the chapel, but found she couldn't move, couldn't raise a hand to protect herself when the woman stopped a foot from her.

"Don't trust him!" the woman all but screamed.

Julia felt someone take her arm. Kay. The wild woman noticed her too.

"Don't trust any man!" the woman shouted and then hurried off.

Kay called after her. "I don't trust Charley! Not after three kids!"

V

Kay was inclined to treat the encounter outside the chapel as a joke and could not be persuaded by Julia to refrain from telling the husbands all about it when they met for lunch. Charley saw the humor, too, but David, as Julia had foreseen, did not. She'd predicted that he would overreact, and that proved true as well.

"This woman isn't a character from one of your movies or books, wandering around in the rain because her heart's broken. For all you know, she's a ticking bomb, one tick away from going off. And now she thinks you're following her around."

"Julia is following her around," Charley observed, "which is kind of amazing."

"It's coincidence," David said, "but this woman might think it's persecution."

"It's fate," Julia said, but only to herself.

She was still thinking of fate the next morning as they caravanned up to St. Andrews, David and Charley squeezed in the Renault and

Kay and Julia following behind in the O'Briens' Audi. They'd taken the coast road for the scenery, and Kay played tour guide whenever they slowed for a village. Eventually, her lecture moved on to St. Andrews itself.

"It's a college town. A university town, I should say. The school and the golf course keep the place humming. There's a beautiful beach, too, and a ruined cathedral. Actually, it's more like the outline of a cathedral. After it collapsed back in the Middle Ages, the townspeople recycled the stone into their shops and houses."

"Is there a castle?" Julia asked.

"Just the remains of one. There's no connection to Mary Stuart, though. At least, none that I've ever heard about. So we won't run into that friend of yours with the loud voice."

"Unless we're fated to," Julia thought.

"I think the castle's history involves the old religious troubles, the Protestants versus the Catholics. Some Protestant leaders were imprisoned there and maybe executed. I can't quite remember. And then the head Catholic, a bishop or cardinal or something, was attacked in the castle and killed. After that they pulled the place down. Not very romantic, but most real life isn't."

Julia recognized the gentle criticism but didn't resent it. She spent the remainder of the drive wondering whether her troubles with David had come about because she'd expected too much romance or had settled for too little.

She was roused from those thoughts by her first sight of St. Andrews, whose rust-roofed houses and stone spires were nestled in a natural bowl between the hills and the sea. Their hotel was on the old market street, only a block from the famous golf course. At the hotel's paneled front desk, whose entire counter was a single window, as small and ornately screened as a confessional's, a message awaited them.

"One of the kids is sick," Kay, to whom the message was addressed, reported. "It's that bug that's been going around their school. I have to go back."

Charley, who was given permission to stay and play his golf, took the news well. Better than David did. He sat down with Julia in their room as soon as they'd settled their bags.

"I have a feeling I should stay with you," he said.

"That's silly. You've waited for years to play this golf course. You'll have to hurry or you'll miss your tee time."

David didn't hurry or even rise from his seat. "I was counting on Kay looking after you. First you hit your head. And then that woman . . ."

"My head is fine. And that woman isn't anywhere near here. I

checked our guidebook. There's no mention of Mary Stuart in connection with the castle."

David did not appear to be comforted by this reasoning. "I'd just as soon you didn't go near the castle. Promise me you won't. Stay here and rest. Or if you feel like exercise, you could walk the course with Charley and me."

Julia laughed. "I'd rather hit my head again."

VI

Julia had been speaking the truth when she'd said that her head was fine, but as soon as she lay back on the bed to nap, it began to throb again. She told herself that it was just a headache and not a reawakening of the injury she'd suffered at Doune, but that diagnosis, though accurate, did not make the pain go away. At first it was a dull ache that allowed her a fitful sleep. Then it slowly grew worse.

Finally, Julia dressed and walked down to the tiny front desk, intending to ask directions to the beach Kay had mentioned. In the lobby she found a rack of pamphlets for local attractions. She hesitated for a moment, then selected a brochure for the castle and began to read.

She learned that, as Kay had told her, the castle's story was also a history of the country's religious strife. Protestant reformer John Knox had been imprisoned there, and a friend of Knox's, George Wishart, had been burned at the stake. When the tide of belief had turned, the local Catholic prelate, Cardinal Beaton, had been murdered in the castle.

Julia paused, not to meditate on that sad history but because the Cardinal's name was somehow familiar. She dug in her shoulder bag, found the pamphlet on Mary, Queen of Scots, and read again the description of her coronation at Stirling Castle as a baby. The clergyman who'd presided and who'd held the crown on her tiny head was a Cardinal David Beaton.

Was it the same man? If so, the castle had a connection to Mary after all, though a tenuous one. Still, Julia thought, if Mary were walking the earth again in the person of a wild-eyed woman from Delaware, she might well stop at the castle to say a prayer for the man who'd crowned her queen. Even a woman who was merely fascinated with Mary's life might do that.

Julia asked at the front desk for directions to the castle and set out. Her route took her through the university, whose stone buildings blended seamlessly into the town's, and then along a quiet, tree-lined street. The castle lay just beyond the last of the trees. Its

grounds were fronted by a low building that contained a ticket office, a souvenir shop, and a museum.

After buying her ticket, Julia started to bypass the small museum. Then, on impulse, she stepped inside. As she wound her way through wax-figure displays of life at the castle at various periods, she was aware that she was stalling. If her Mary was there, she wouldn't be pretending to read placards in a museum. She'd be out on the ruined battlements, holding her lonely vigil. Unless she was leaving at that very moment, slipping away to the next stop in her peculiar tour.

That thought made Julia master her nerves and hurry toward an exit. She was sure she was meant to help this suffering woman. Or almost sure. That had to be the explanation for their meeting again and again. Today would be the supreme test. If they met today, many miles from those other Mary landmarks, at a place with only the slightest connection to the unhappy queen, Julia would be certain.

Instead of depositing visitors at the castle's main gate, the museum let them in through a gap in what remained of a side wall. Julia found herself on a sunny lawn that lay where the castle's keep should have been. The lawn ended abruptly at a cliff top that overlooked the cobalt sea, the edge guarded by a white railing. Along the railing were a series of benches, facing seaward. Julia saw only one other visitor, a person seated on the leftmost bench. This figure—Julia couldn't be sure if it was a man or a woman—was wearing a windbreaker of the right color, but the head above the jacket was covered by a brown, shapeless hat.

Julia walked out to the bench on the opposite end of the line, hoping to get a better view of the other. There she was distracted by the sound of laughter coming up from below. She stepped up to the rail, which seemed to her too low, and looked over. A hundred feet below, on a tiny crescent of rocky beach, a large group of young people was playing volleyball.

Julia turned from them in time to see the figure in blue stand up and start toward the far corner of the courtyard. In that corner was the broken base of a tower that had once watched over the seaward approaches to the castle, its stone was so weathered now that it looked like an outcropping of the cliff itself. As Julia watched, the other removed the shapeless hat and shook free long auburn hair.

Julia froze, her breath catching in her throat. Then she forced herself to follow. This was no chance meeting, she told herself. It was preordained. Nor was it to be just another meeting. This was the climactic moment, the fulfillment of all the rest. The woman's

actions made Julia sure of it. The stranger had begun to climb stairs that led to an exposed platform atop the tower fragment, a vantage point high above the sea and the rocky beach below. Its significance was not lost on Julia. As she'd done at Doune, the woman was seeking out a lonely height.

The platform's edge had the same white railing as the lawn. Julia knew that it wouldn't stop the other, not for a moment, not if she'd made up her mind to jump. She hurried across the grass to the stairway. When she reached its bottom step, she briefly lost sight of the woman above. In a panic, she climbed at a run, each upward step bringing an answering stab of pain from her temples. She forgot the pain when she reached the top and saw that her companion was still there, though dangerously close to the railing.

"Hello," Julia called out as she started across the flags. The woman turned, and Julia braced herself for another explosion, at men or perhaps at meddling strangers. Instead, the woman smiled a warm and beautiful smile, a smile so natural, it forced Julia to add, "Then you're all right."

"I've never been better, Julia."

The rescuer stopped only feet from the railing. "How do you know my name?"

"How could I not know it? We're linked."

Julia, who'd felt the same thing for days now, took an involuntary step forward. It put her within reach of the stranger, who extended both arms.

Julia's impulse was to return the hug she was certain was coming. But as she tried, she was swung about and pushed backward against the low railing. She had a second's dizzying view of the brown hat as it sailed downward toward the rocks. Instinctively, she locked her hands together behind her attacker's waist.

"What are you doing?" she gasped.

The answer came in a silken whisper. "I'm breaking our link. I can't live with it, Julia. I can't live with you in the world. One of us goes today."

The whisperer shifted her hold to Julia's locked hands. With surprising ease, she pulled them apart and thrust the left hand out into the air, where its fingers clawed furiously. Julia's right found and seized the blue windbreaker, but she could feel the slick material slipping through her grasp.

A face appeared above the woman's shoulder. David's. He pivoted the struggling pair until they were both against the railing and forced himself between them. Then the wild stranger, leaning out beyond David's chest to strike at Julia's head, tumbled over.

Julia watched her fall before dropping herself, in a dead faint, onto the flagstones.

VII

Hours later, Julia was seated in a bright, well-scrubbed examination room of the local hospital. The space made her think of a police station, and that quality of the room's aura might have been the contribution of its other occupant, who leaned against the edge of a metal table. He was a tall, older man dressed in black, whose bulging forehead and small features combined to make his face appear concave. The face also seemed to Julia sad, or at least disappointed. The sunken eyes were hooded, and the heavy mouth drawn downward.

"Thank you for your statement, Mrs. Caden," he said. "It all tallies. That is, it agrees with your husband's statement and those of our other witnesses." He paused to shake his head before muttering, "Mary, Queen of Scots."

Julia felt her face color. She said, "The woman knew my name."

"Well, she would know it, wouldn't she?" the policeman replied. "I suppose I'm the one to explain things, Mrs. Caden. I wish your friend Mrs. O'Brien were here to do it. She's on her way back, by the way. Her child is much better. If you'd like, we could wait for her."

"Please tell me, Inspector."

The man pulled at his long face. "Just as you say. The woman who fell to her death was one Marian Goodson. Ever hear that name before?"

"No," Julia said.

"No. She was an American, as you'd inferred from her waterproof. She still lived in Delaware, in fact, where she'd gone to college. She worked at a firm there at which your husband regularly called."

Julia breathed in sharply.

"Exactly," the policeman said. "Ms. Goodson and your husband conducted a brief affair earlier this year, brief on his side at least. It occurred during a period when you and Mr. Caden were estranged. I'll leave it to you to work out which was the cause and which the effect. For my purposes, it's enough to know that your husband tried to end the liaison and Ms. Goodson wouldn't have it.

"She'd been told by Mr. Caden that you two were attempting a reconciliation, that you'd planned a trip to Scotland as part of that effort. Your husband, who is a careful man in some things, left

your complete itinerary at his office. I'm sure we'll find that Ms. Goodson obtained a copy, by fair means or foul. That was how she contrived the meetings you found so remarkable."

"And her connection to Mary Stuart?"

"An invention of your own, I'm afraid. This Marian wasn't very like our Mary, except for the color of her hair. She certainly wasn't the fighter the queen was. Imagine coming all this way to break up a marriage and then not being able to simply step forward and do it. She seemed to have thought that her mere presence would be enough, that the sight of her would so remind Mr. Caden of all he was giving up he would do her dirty work for her.

"That didn't happen, and she became more desperate, very desperate after she and your husband spoke at Doune Castle."

"They spoke? When?"

"They met on the stairs when he was coming to look for you. He told her then that whatever happened with your marriage, he would never see her again. That has to have changed her line of thinking. Begun to change it. From trying to steal your husband, she must have begun to think of eliminating you. It can't have been in her mind at Doune. You were certainly in her power on the roof after you'd struck your head, but she didn't act. Nor did she at Edinburgh, where the presence of the crowd and especially of Mrs. O'Brien protected you.

"Your husband was counting on Mrs. O'Brien's acting as your guardian today, though he didn't bother taking her into his confidence. He couldn't change your rendezvous with the O'Briens or the time of his round at St. Andrews, which, as you know, was set up a year in advance. He couldn't make that radical a switch without a full explanation. He wishes now, of course, that he had confessed all. I believe him.

"I believe him, too, when he says that he didn't think for a moment that Ms. Goodson would make an attempt on your life. That is, he didn't think so before this afternoon. Not before he called your hotel during a break in their play and learned that you'd gone out, after asking directions to the castle. Then he had a foreboding and acted upon it. Acted just in time too."

"The castle wasn't on any itinerary," Julia said. "How could she know I'd go there?"

"She followed you. She'd been watching your hotel all day. Several shopkeepers noticed her. She got ahead of you at the castle when you stopped at that awful waxworks they have there.

"I'm afraid you fell in with her plans then by following her up onto that tower. Now that I've heard your theory about Mary Stuart, I understand why you did it, so there's no difficulty there.

Or with what happened next. The students down on the beach witnessed the attempt to push you over. And Mr. Caden's timely intervention."

Julia was barely listening. "I thought she might be Mary, Queen of Scots," she said. "And all the time, it was me."

The policeman stirred uneasily. "I beg your pardon, madam?"

"I was the one betrayed by the man I trusted."

"Oh, that. Betrayal is part of Queen Mary's story, but only a part of it. I've always been more impressed by the old girl's resilience, by her ability to bounce back from all her disappointments, by the way she kept fighting to the end to keep what was hers. If you have to have something in common with her, that's what I would choose."

He stood up. "Your husband is waiting outside. He's anxious to see you if you feel equal to it."

"I do," Julia said. ♀

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

FUL QDCF BLCFRXT ZQDVL YS FUL EYIM JDC D
WLBL RXILXFDTRYX RX FUL SYBLCF SQYYB, RX
DZZLDBDXVL DC ZLDVLSGQ DC FUL UYQQYJ QLSF
EM D CQLLRXT SDJX.

—PDFUM QMXX LWLBCYX

CIPHER: _____

ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Solution on page 139

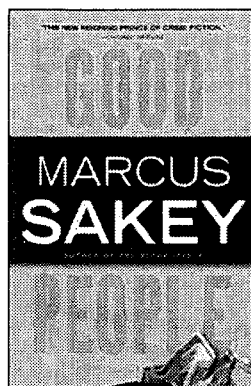
BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

The Windy City has a long tradition as a setting for fine mysteries and home to mystery writers themselves, from the days of W.R. Burnett's *Little Caesar* and Frank Gruber's *The Leather Duke* to Craig Rice's wonderfully zany John J. Malone novels, and on up to such current stalwarts as trailblazer Sara Paretsky and the prolific Max Allan Collins.

Following in those fine footsteps, the crop of rising authors making their mark in Chicago today is outstanding and cuts across a wide swath of styles and genres. Marcus Sakey favors standalone novels rather than a series hero and has produced three winners in a row; J.A. Konrath features a tough homicide detective, Jacqueline "Jack" Daniels, who can both take it and dish it out; and Barbara Fister's Anni Koskinen started out as a cop but felt compelled to resign and now operates as a P.I.

Relative newcomer Marcus Sakey's exceptionally fine debut in 2007 with *The Blade Itself* was followed by *At the City's Edge* in 2008, a strong sophomore effort. His third novel, *GOOD PEOPLE* (Dutton, \$24.95), is his strongest yet, delivering a sustained, exciting, draining game of cat-and-mouse.



Sakey places his protagonists in situations where they are tested and taxed physically, emotionally, and morally. In *Good People*, the fulcrum that tips Anna and Tom Reed from their ordinary life— young professionals struggling to have a baby while working hard at jobs they merely tolerate—is the death of their reclusive tenant and the \$400,000 they

find hidden in his ground floor apartment.

The money that seems like the answer to their prayers quickly leads to nightmarish consequences. The fortune has other claimants, and they are vicious ones: a robber who already killed to steal the money and a drug dealer who lost a valuable cache of drugs in that same robbery. Both have the tenacity and the

resources to discover who has the fortune or at least what remains of it.

Sakey's fast-moving plot takes the reader on a harrowing journey as Tom and Anna struggle desperately to escape with their lives, if not the money. Tom and Anna turn out to be remarkably resourceful, but there is no way for them to escape unscathed, nowhere for them to turn for help, and no way that either villain is going to give up. Sakey ratchets up the tension repeatedly, expertly devising moves and counter-moves that keep the reader engrossed from start to finish.

In three short years Sakey has established himself as a master of suspense who can find one simple, credible moment that transforms an ordinary life into a supreme test of values, ingenuity, and sheer will to survive.

J. A. Konrath's drink-titled series about Chicago homicide detective Jacqueline "Jack" Daniels kicked off in 2004 with *Whiskey Sour*, which won a Macavity award for best first novel. *Bloody Mary* (2005), *Rusty Nail* (2006), and *Dirty Martini* (2007) blazed an alcoholic trail to this year's **FUZZY NAVEL** (Hyperion, \$23.95)

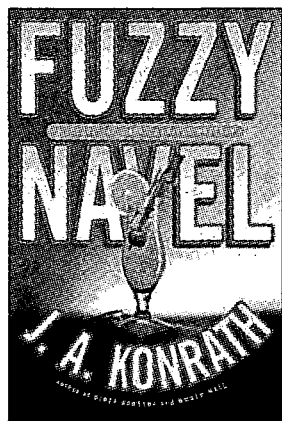
The recipe for Konrath's print creations calls for one gutsy female homicide cop, a collection of ancillary characters with both quirks and substance, one or more very, very bad guys, and at least a dash of offbeat humor—sometimes a very generous helping of humor.

The body count in *Fuzzy Navel* reaches high numbers, though the humor, still offbeat, seems somewhat muted as Daniels faces the most daunting odds and tasks of her stellar career.

Daniels gets a call early in the novel telling her that Alexandra Kork, a deadly enemy, has committed suicide. Unfortunately for Daniels, that may not be true. But things really start to get rocky when sharpshooters carry out three separate assassinations simultaneously in Chicago, one of which is followed by a deadly attack on a cop.

Konrath goes all out in this one, stacking the odds against Daniels in every way imaginable, and he seems to poke a little good-natured fun at fellow Chicago author Sakey by naming a rookie cop Sakey, and giving him a less than glamorous role to play.

Barbara Fister is an academic librarian who may soon want to



consider becoming a full-time writer if the success of her debut novel, 2002's *On Edge*, and the promise of her second novel are fulfilled.

Fister has endowed her series character, Anni Koskinen, with a rich background and given her supporting cast the depth and breadth that promise to sustain a lengthy series. Anni was once a Chicago cop, but when she testified against a colleague, the backlash was great enough that she quit the force and became a P.I.

In *IN THE WIND* (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$24.95), Anni casually agrees to give Rosa Saenz, a volunteer from Father Sikora's community center, a ride to Bemidji, Minnesota, a trip that once again brings Anni into conflict with her old police colleagues as well as the FBI and possibly her own mentor, FBI agent Jim Tilquist.

The FBI suspects that Rosa is a suspect wanted in a 1972 crime that resulted in the death of one of their agents. Anni's unwitting involvement with Rosa leads her into a history lesson involving anti-Vietnam War protests and the American Indian Movement (AIM), including a militant splinter group known as Ishkode. Swept into the case by factors that include threats and attacks on her and her brother, Anni is forced to seek answers that may drive a permanent wedge between her and her mentor.

Fister draws vivid parallels between the extra-legal responses of the FBI during that fractious period of the seventies and similar restrictions on civil liberties today. In addition she delivers a solid plot and characters that one looks forward to meeting again and again in future cases.

ALL POINTS BULLETIN: Chicago policeman-turned-author Michael A. Black brings outcast Sergeant Frank Leal to light in *RANDOM VICTIM*, which examines a murder during a tense Windy City election season. Published by Leisure Fiction in April of this year. • Fellow Chicago native Julie Hyzy introduces the new White House Chef series with her fourth novel, featuring presidential chef and accidental sleuth Olivia Paras in *STATE OF THE UNION*, coming out in December from Berkley Prime Crime. • AHMM regular Jim Ingraham introduces female deputy sheriff Perci Piper in his Maine college campus murder mystery *REMAINS TO BE SEEN*, his first novel, published by Five Star in July.

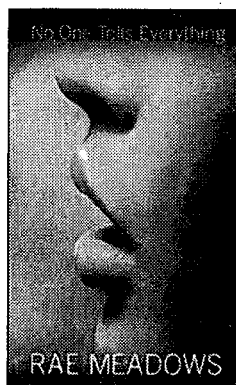
In Rae Meadows's second novel *NO ONE TELLS EVERYTHING* (MacAdam/Cage, \$23), a stirring confessional journey, Grace is

not doing so well. She flounders in her mid-thirties at a lukewarm editing job in Manhattan, spends nights with her only semi-friend, a bartender, and is tormented by her younger sister's death decades ago, an event she tries to forget with many glasses of wine.

Miles away in Upstate New York, Charles, a college freshman, is in jail, accused of the heinous murder of his fellow classmate, a popular female student. After learning about him in the news, Grace feels sorry for the young man and establishes contact with him. Her attempt to humanize Charles feeds her own need to absolve herself of her own past.

Meadows's treatment of Grace and Charles is daringly ceaseless in its sympathy. Grace is self-destructive and obsessed with a presumed killer, and Charles is a pariah whose misery becomes harrowing. But thanks to Meadows's thoughtful portrayal, readers will feel reluctant to leave them. Grace's life amidst her letters and phone calls to the imprisoned Charles, and Charles's second-person monologues interspersed throughout the novel, provide an intimate psychological examination of two souls in turmoil over their supposed crimes.

A few characters are not so well rounded. Grace's mother, a nervous suburban housewife, and Charles's neglectful, wealthy parents seem one-dimensional. But ultimately, Meadows's novel is an antidote to the simplistic modern-day persecution of criminals and their supporters on the evening news. It suggests that while the public may press blame against one villain for a heinous act, we are all collectively responsible for our outcasts. —*Laurel Fantauzzo*



CATCH YOUR DEATH

D. A. McGUIRE

It took me a few seconds to get a clear image. Because of the rain everything was slightly off center and out of focus.

It was an A-frame-style house. One huge room front to back consisting of the kitchen and living room, with a screened-in porch and two small bedrooms; upstairs was one huge room that was more like an attic than an ordinary second floor. Two entrances, one off the porch, facing the main road, the second off the kitchen and looking onto a smaller side road. A detached, oversized boat garage out back had been converted into a workshop. The driveway onto the side road was covered with broken quahog and oyster shells. The good-sized yard was covered in brown, early spring grass. A large oak at the corner angled slightly toward the house; a few well-shaped cedars were scattered throughout the yard. In the driveway sat a battered red truck.

The light rain trickled off my hair and slipped down under my collar. Shivering, I shoved my hands into my pockets and closed my eyes as the music in my ears pumped solace. I was starting to feel it again, even though she had said, *"It's perfectly safe; it just makes things better."*

How long I stood there listening, thinking? I don't know. I didn't know what time it was, or even what day, though I knew I'd stood like this before in the rain, looking at this house, then heading down the road to the beach.

But today, suddenly, he was there. He wore a khaki rain slicker with the hood pulled over his head. His eyes were two brilliant black beads staring at me.

"Herbert J. Sawyer!" he snapped. "Hell, boy, what are you doing out here?" He had something large and shiny in his hands, something made of metal. He pushed it down in the muddy ground in front of him. "Damn fool you are, Herbie. You'll catch your death out here! Get in the house."

Mr. Hornton made me coffee, grunting disapproval when I took off my jacket and put it over a kitchen chair to dry. The sound was for my hair, I guess. I just half shrugged, and though my concen-



tration was off, I offered to help. He waved me away with an angry shake of his head.

I tucked the headphones under my collar and looked around at the small, spare surroundings, which hadn't changed in—what?—six months perhaps, maybe a year. Same small television with its crooked antenna, even though he had finally installed cable a year ago. The same ragged horsehair sofa and chairs. Same caned coffee table where I had worked on math homework many a Saturday afternoon. Same knickknacks and pictures on the wall: a whaler's harpoon up near the open-raftered ceiling, a couple of kerosene lamps converted to electric, and an odd assortment of crab shells, ship's bells, and framed photos. One of the photos was of me and him with Jake and my mother.

"Heard you were going to school in Falmouth," he said, setting a mug, some sugar packets, and a pint of milk in front of me. "How is it over there?"

"Okay." I shrugged.

"And I've seen—" He settled into a chair opposite me and pushed aside a walker with a belligerent grunt.

The shiny metallic object I had seen him with outside. "You need a walker now?" I asked.

He ignored that and continued. "—where your house is up for sale. All for the best, Herbie."

"Best?" Everything suddenly had a very fine cast to it, as though I were looking at him, the coffee, this whole room—and the whole world—through a silvery mist. "Yeah, I guess it is." I wanted to laugh.

"Look, boy—" He sighed heavily and ran a hand over his mouth. "—I know it's not been an easy haul. If things had been different, if I hadn't taken that fall and had the stroke, damn it, you'd be right here staying with me."

Such a dreamer this man was. When my mother had been taken away, the courts hadn't allowed me to live with my own aunt, so what made Elmer Hornton—this elderly, disabled, retired sign painter—think the state would let me stay with him? I smiled and wrapped both hands around the mug. Well, let him have his fantasies: It seemed everybody wanted to save me lately.

"As for Jake," he went on, "he talked to the principal of your school, and things aren't all that 'okay.' You got in another fight, you skipped school last week, and your teachers say you aren't keeping up with the work. I got to admit, boy, I'm more than a little worried about you."

"The fight was nothing," I said. "Kid shoved me into a locker, I shoved back." I set the mug down, ran a hand through my hair. It

was short and spiky; the rain left just a sprinkle of dampness there. "And I'm doing okay at school. Don't worry about me."

"And these people you're staying with, the Wenlows—" He was worried; maybe coming back to the old neighborhood wasn't such a good idea. "—Do they treat you . . . ?"

My whole body grew cold for a second. "Mr. Hornton, they treat me just fine."

"Foster family, damn it," he said, shaking his head and giving his walker a kick. "Here I am, worthless old cuss, and Jake, as well, and damn state won't let you stay with either of us."

"Or my aunt," I said. It didn't matter. I couldn't let it matter.

"Your aunt is a good woman," he said, "Just a bit overwhelmed at the moment, what with your mother in the hospital."

"My aunt has six kids, a drinking problem, and is on her third husband. My mother is in a state mental institution, which she's never going to get out of, and you and Jake aren't blood relatives. I'm back in school and living with a foster family. But it's okay, Mr. Hornton. It really is." I got up abruptly, jarring the table, almost knocking the mug over.

He reached out and grabbed me by the wrist, as if he wanted to keep me there, and perhaps he might have succeeded. Though he was approaching eighty, and incapacitated to some degree, he still was a strong man, having done physical labor all his life. His grip was tight. Looking at me, he said, "Listen to me, Herbert J., don't talk to me like that. You, your mother, and Jake are the only family I have."

Were his eyes welling up? Yes, they were, and though I should have felt like a complete ass, I was just annoyed.

"Look," I said, "I came by to see how you were and if you could hook me up with any odd jobs next week. It's spring vacation." He let me go. "I can do anything, you know that. Painting, wood-working, yard work." I shrugged again. "I need to keep busy."

The jetty felt funny to me that afternoon, like each rock was made of some spongy material. Kind of made me laugh as I walked out to the end. I found a dry rock out there, one without the usual seagull droppings, and sat down. I was wearing one of Mr. Hornton's flannel-lined slickers. He had insisted I take it before I left.

I pulled the hood up over my head and for the third, maybe fourth time this week, sat there and listened to a little Rammstein on the MP3 player I'd stolen. I had downloaded about twenty gigs of music using a teacher's computer at the place I'd been sent to

last spring. I had a lot of rock, but also some metal and electronica.

I closed my eyes and suddenly felt very relaxed, very peaceful. So far the day had been pretty boring. The Wenlows had said something about not forgetting my chores this morning, but strangely, I had forgotten exactly what chores they wanted me to do. Maybe they should have reminded me.

Nah, I wouldn't have done them anyhow.

I lifted my head, opened my eyes. It seemed like a fog was rolling in, casting a mist over the water. That seemed odd, but then I figured it must be going on three, four in the afternoon. Up on the beach were a man and woman and two little kids. The adults were arguing and pointing out toward a boat in the water. It was a small white skiff tied to a mooring line that ran off a post staked in the beach. The line went out into the water for about eighty feet, where it was tied to a second metal post in the water. The woman seemed sort of upset, and every now and then she'd point

How could she have disappeared so quickly?

toward the boat, then turn back to him with her hands out in a pleading sort of gesture. The two kids, both girls in orange rain slickers, were just standing there.

Funny thing, people like that, arguing about a boat on a miserable Saturday afternoon, although suddenly the sky seemed to be clearing. I looked out to the open water to see if there was a larger boat moored farther out. Some people used small skiffs to get out to larger craft.

Nope. There were a lot of boats moored in the river on the other side of the jetty and farther up in the marinas, but there wasn't a single boat out here in the open bay, except the little white skiff.

Well, none of my business. I pumped up the volume on the player and put my head forward against my knees to listen. A few minutes later I reached into my pocket, found a small foil packet, and pulled it out. For a minute I just stared at it, then looked up at the brightening sky. The light wind out of the southwest felt good against my face. In fact, suddenly everything felt pretty good. I snapped the packet open with my thumb, tipped it up to my mouth, and swallowed.

I hadn't been listening for that long, maybe fifteen minutes or so, but this music was known for its long tracks. It had happened that I would be lying on my bed, listening to remixes of Depeche Mode or Delerium, and time would fly by. I'd glance at the clock, see it was eight at night, then suddenly raise my head again and

it'd be eleven and Mrs. Wenlow would be shouting up, "Lights out, Herbie."

So I had a hard time judging how long I'd been sitting there. When I looked up, the sun was turning into the west. Long enough, I guess. I stood up, pushed the headphones down around my neck, and walked back down the jetty and onto the beach.

For a moment I was confused. I was there on the sand, my stomach felt a little sick, and there was someone beside me saying, "Get her."

I turned. Beside me was a little girl about five years old, with long dark hair and dark eyes. Wearing an orange rain slicker, she stared up at me earnestly.

She pointed out to the water. "My doll fell in the water."

"Your doll?" I relaxed and felt the beat of the music rolling against my neck. I hadn't shut off the player.

"Get her," she said again, her voice very low, very flat.

I looked out to where she pointed and could see a shape, small and white, bobbing up and down in the water about sixty feet from shore.

"You know how cold that water is?" I said. "Get her yourself." I started to walk away. Did I really care about some kid who'd lost a doll in the water? Then my eyes fell on the mooring line which ran from the beach out to the post in the water.

Damn, I was in such a strange mood. The urge to pull the hood up over my head and walk away was overpowering. I was cold, then warm, and the shudder rippling through my body was alternately painful and strangely pleasant. The skies were so bright and clear, the wind so warm—and then suddenly I felt a light sprinkle of rain touch my face. I blinked my eyes and looked straight up. Rain again?

Something made me turn around. What if the kid went out in the boat to try and get the doll herself? I looked back toward Long Jetty, but she was gone.

For a moment I stood there puzzled. Where had she gone? How could she have disappeared so quickly?

I glanced up and down the beach, then up to the row of cottages above the seawall. I turned around and walked back toward the jetty, but there was no sign of her.

"Okay, I'll get the damn thing," I muttered as I grabbed the mooring line and slowly pulled the boat up to the shoreline. There were no oars or paddles, but I climbed into the boat with a sigh, sat down, and hauled myself out by pulling on the line. I was trespassing on someone else's property to fish a stupid doll out of the water.

Barely in six feet of water it was, and hardly thirty yards out, but the skiff took a wave and started to buck. Then just as suddenly the water calmed and I pulled the boat out to the end of the line. The doll was jammed up against the metal post, head down at a funny angle. I reached out, careful not to capsize myself—I know boats pretty good—and grabbed the doll's hair, which was the closest part of it to me. I yanked and pulled it forward, thinking, "Damn, this is one heavy doll." A bit waterlogged, the doll was bigger than it appeared from the beach. It was wearing a thin little dress, like a slip.

I pulled it up close to the side of the skiff and carefully leaned over to haul it aboard, but it must have weighed at least twenty pounds. "What the heck is this thing made of?" I muttered. I couldn't lift it, and that made me laugh. I'd hauled lobster pots with twenty pounds plus of lobster in them, and heavy gear off and onto boats, no problem. I guess six months tucked away in an *alternative school setting* had done a number on me. I was weak, slow, and out of condition.

So as I struggled to get the thing up and drain some water from the doll, it slipped and turned in my grip. As it did, I saw the face briefly—dark eyes, sort of floating, like marbles. There was a wrinkled, greenish cast to the plastic skin.

"Damn weird doll," I said, deciding then to pull myself back to shore using the mooring line, dragging the doll behind the skiff. "Probably not much good anymore."

"You know," I said to myself, "I've done some pretty stupid things, and here I am bringing this thing to shore for a kid who just can't wait to get it back." I sighed, swore, pulled the boat to the shoreline, and stepped out into the shallow surf, which immediately lapped over my work boots and into the cuffs of my socks. I swore again and pushed the boat onto the sand, then reached into the water to pull out the kid's precious doll.

But what had felt stiff and plasticlike in the water, now was limp and heavy as I dragged it onto the sand. I stepped back, wiped my hands on my jeans, and reached into the hood of my jacket to pull up my headphones . . . then I looked down at the thing.

Thing. Doll. I bent down to flip it over, and suddenly I saw, as Delerium rocked through the headphones and into my brain, the faint pink-white froth inside the open mouth.

It wasn't a doll. It was a dead child.

I turned away, fell to my knees, and threw up in the surf.

"Look at me."

I was sitting at Sergeant Jake Valari's desk, my head forward on his blotter pad, arms over my head.

"Herbie, you know you've got to talk to me. You've got to tell me everything you did, you saw. You *know* that."

I lifted my head. "I already told Officer Andersen everything." I ran a hand back through my short, spiky hair. "I thought she was a doll! I already said all this to Officer Andersen!"

"I am really struggling to maintain my patience," was Jake's reply. I could sense the subtle shifting of his body, and I knew that if the law had allowed, he would have pinned me to this desk and slapped me silly long before now.

So I eased off. "I told him I've been going back to my old neighborhood, to check things out." I eased out a long sigh, realizing things were getting clearer and that the headache was finally gone. I looked up at the clock on his wall. Five fifteen. That was about right, time for things to wear off. I looked at Jake directly.

Detective. Sergeant Jake Valari, the only detective on the Manamesset Police Force. Jake, my friend, who had once dated my mother and had helped her get a job in the Manamesset public school system. He had also helped us buy our house. Also the same Jake with whom I had lived a few weeks when my mother was first hospitalized. Jake, who had gone through situations like this with me before.

I continued, "I've been out to Long Jetty a couple times this week, and I was just sitting there today, listening to a few tunes." I showed him the phones around my neck, careful not to reveal the player tucked in my shirt pocket. "There were some people arguing on the beach. I ignored them. A little while later . . ." I paused; the more I told this story, the less I liked it. " . . . when I was on the beach, this kid asked me to get her doll."

"A girl about five years old, with long dark hair, wearing an orange rain slicker." Jake looked up at me from what must have been Officer Andersen's notes. "Anything else?"

"What more do you want?" I asked. "It's all right there." I nodded at the notepad.

Jake ignored me, went on, "So you pulled in the skiff and hauled out of the water what you thought was a doll. You brought it up to the beach and then realized it wasn't a doll, but the body of a child?"

"Yes."

"What you got in your pocket, Herbie, jeans pocket, lower right?"

"What?"

Jake turned back to the notepad. "Don't be so obvious. You keep putting your hand there to make sure it's still there."

Suddenly I grew a little nervous. Had I forgotten how good a cop Jake was?

"Just the Wenlows' house key," I quickly lied. "They gave me one because my room is over their garage and they, I don't know, trust me, I guess."

"Any reason they shouldn't trust you?"

"Hey, is this an inquisition into me, my life?" I demanded. "I pulled the body of a . . . a little girl out of the water and I thought at first it was a doll, and then when I saw . . ." I ran the back of my hand across my forehead; the headache was coming back.

"You got sick, then went up to Briarwood Road, saw some utility workers, and had them call us." Jake eased back in his chair, folded his arms across his chest.

"Yes, I did."

"You covered her with your rain slicker first."

"Yes . . ." I felt thirsty and cold. I swallowed and looked across his small office. Above a tall bookcase near the door was a framed photograph, the same one that was in Elmer Hornton's living room. "I did. It was Mr. Hornton's. His rain slicker."

Jake sighed, which was more like a grunt, and stood up. He slapped the notepad on his desk and said, "Sorry if I made this sound like an inquisition, but you touched the body. The Wenlows are on their way to take you home, but we need to take some hair and fiber samples from you first."

I looked up at him and swallowed; my throat was so dry it hurt.

"I didn't hurt that kid, Jake."

"Yeah, I know," he said. "Tell me, Herbie, are you on something?"

"Something?" I looked at him and smiled. "No, no. I'm just . . . upset, Jake. This has been a bad day. Can I use . . .?"

He nodded and I got up and went into the bathroom off his office.

I am no longer that twelve-year-old boy who discovered a body in a marsh four years ago. I do not know where that boy went, or when he went away, but he is gone.

The first time this was apparent to me was when I sat on the broken picnic bench outside the "alternative school" where I'd been sent six months ago. There'd been other kids there, talking, sharing cigarettes, laughing, and looking at me. That day I had wondered whether I was a participant, or merely a spectator. All the sudden I was living with the abandoned and neglected, the abused, troubled, and forgotten—but was I really one of them?

Because that twelve-year-old boy, that Herbert J. Sawyer who had tumbled down a marshy bank to check his bait traps and

found the body did not belong in *that* place. That boy had been so young and yet so sure, so sharp, so unencumbered by pretense or lie, feint or design.

That boy, staring at his image in the mirror of this bathroom, would not have looked like this. His eyes would have been clear and focused, not these dark-ringed eyes I see staring back at me.

And even at twelve, that boy would have been appalled and outraged, demanding answers. Why is it this way, and how can it be changed? What can I do, he'd have asked. Yes, he'd have run to the first adult in his path—parent, friend, teacher, police officer—and asked for advice, help, answers. That boy had had conviction; he'd had compassion, and maybe courage. But sadly, I am not that boy anymore. I am someone . . .

No, I am *something* else.

I looked at the foil packets in my pocket, carefully counting them out. Six remaining. At least six more hidden in my room at the Wenlows'. I looked back in the mirror at my face, my eyes in particular. Windows to the soul? If so, then the soul I was staring into was dark indeed.

I carefully tucked the pills back into my pocket, drank two cups of water, then went out into Jake's office. He wasn't there, so I let myself out.

I stood for a moment, staring at the house with the FOR SALE sign out front. Manamesset Real Estate, it read, shown by appointment only. I looked up and down the street, then with one yank I uprooted the sign and threw it into the marsh across the street. Then I turned around and looked at the house.

Our house, my mother's and mine until depression and mental illness had taken her away. Still, it was our house and I didn't care if a neighbor called the cops on me. I just walked up the front steps to the door and, cupping my hands against the glass, looked inside at the front porch.

No curtains in the windows, no rugs on the floor, no furniture in the rooms. When I turned the doorknob, I found myself locked out. My Aunt Clem had changed the locks. Well, I didn't have my old key anyway.

I turned around, wiping the back of my hand across my eyes and forehead. Late afternoon on a damp spring day and I had another headache. I wasn't sure what day it was either. Sunday? No, still Saturday, the start of April school vacation.

I went around to the back door, through dead brown grass and the tattered remains of my mother's flower garden. It was grow-

ing colder and the wind cut through my jacket like a razor. I tried the back door and found it locked as well, then I remembered a window into the rear bathroom and a screen, which I was supposed to have repaired. I jumped down from the steps and around to the back, looked up, and saw the screen was still torn. A simple matter to climb up and into my own house.

The kitchen, with our rickety kitchen table and two chairs, was emptied of every appliance, utensil, and dish, except the bright yellow shelf paper I had helped my mother lay three years ago. The pantry was empty, not even a can of soup, or a bit of sugar or flour in the bent metal canisters. The living room was a huge hole in the center of the house, a great, big blank space. My bedroom was also stripped clean, only one dresser left standing. I pulled the drawers open. Empty, empty, empty.

In my mother's room, her bed remained and a pair of curtains were still hanging in a side window. I turned suddenly just as the sun started to sink into the sea to the west and the natural light through the living room windows washed over everything with an ethereal grayness.

I pulled the headphones up from under my collar. Listening to the vague dead sounds of an obscure German band, their voices like echoes in a deep underground cave, I went out into the living room.

Time is quite a fluid thing: It can move forward with surprising speed sometimes. When I lifted my head from my knees from the spot on the living room floor where I had been sitting, it was totally dark. It felt strange to look out the windows and see the stars. I had no way to gauge the time, no clock, no radio, no sense of whether it was seven or nine or midnight.

But neither did I care. I went into my mother's bedroom and ripped the curtains from the window. Then, lying down on the bare mattress, I wrapped myself in them and listened to my German bands until the battery in the MP3 player went dead and I fell asleep.

I awoke in a sort of dream, realizing I had been cold, had slept very cold for hours perhaps, but now I was warm. And then knowing this, I awoke with a jolt, sitting upright, throwing a heavy, green plaid blanket off me.

"Damn," I muttered, then immediately I felt for my headphones, but they were still there, though pushed back from my ears. I reached in the jacket, found the music player in the inner pocket, and breathed a sigh of relief.

Then I smelled coffee.



"Breaking and entering," Jake was saying, sitting at the small kitchen table. The lights were on and the room was warm. In fact, the whole house was warm. "Trespassing." He looked up at me, tapping a pencil against the side of his face. "Destruction of personal property."

"Personal property?"

"You pulled down those curtains, tore them."

"They were crap anyhow," I said bitterly, dragging out a chair to sit down next to him at my table in my house. "I guess Aunt Clem figured she couldn't sell them at a yard sale."

"Your Aunt Clem is selling this house for you," Jake reminded me, pushing a cup of hot coffee and a chocolate donut toward me. "And you broke in, forced entry. I saw where you cut the screen."

"The screen was ripped," I snarled, kicking back in the chair. "And this is my house."

"Your aunt inventoried everything in this house down to the last light bulb. I was here and I helped her do it. She sold what she could, put the rest in storage, and is trying to get the best price she can for the house. You do know your mother was six months in arrears on most of her bills? She hadn't paid the mortgage in—"

I cut him off, "Screw all that and screw my aunt. She's nothing but a greedy—" I didn't say it, but he heard it anyhow.

"If there was any soap in the house, I'd wash your mouth out with it."

"Might be some left in the bathroom," I quipped.

He ignored that, and leaning over a pad of paper on the table, wrote something, saying as he did, "Add to that runaway. You didn't go home last night and the Wenlows have reported you a possible runaway." He raised his cool blue eyes to me. "I also think you took some pills. I found this out on Long Jetty." He dug around inside his corduroy jacket and pulled out a torn foil packet, showed it briefly to me, then put it back. "I also suspect that player you guard so carefully is stolen. . . . Isn't it?"

"To hell with this . . . inquisition," I barked, getting up. "And to hell with you, Jake." The next words were right there, on the tip of my tongue, the words I wanted to say, but something in his look silenced them.

He said, with greatly strained patience, "Good thing I like you, boy, or you'd be flat on the floor by now. Sit down." He was so calm, too calm, and I knew I'd dodged a bullet.

So I swallowed deeply, trying to remember the last time I'd eaten anything. I sat back down and Jake shoved the manila envelope at me.

"Look at this."

"Look at what?" I said, picking up and shoving half the donut in my mouth.

"It's the autopsy report on that little girl you found. Well, preliminary, not all the tests are in, but—"

"No!" I said, risking his anger again, but I had a point. "This isn't my job!" I pushed the envelope back. I took a huge swig of coffee, nearly burning my mouth.

"We're getting a lot of zeroes on this one," he said to me. "It's going to hit the news today and we have no idea who she is or where she came from."

"It was just a local kid, who fell off a boat or something. Check missing children. Check the local schools."

"No children missing from the area fit her description."

"One day and you say you're getting zeroes?" I snapped. "Do your job, damn it, and leave me . . ." The donut was starting to make me sick and I pushed the rest of it away. "Listen, I've got to go. I gotta . . ." I felt sort of dizzy.

"Female, brown hair, brown eyes, approximately thirty-two pounds, three years old. Dressed in a child's white cotton slip. Scrapes on both palms and the right knee, but no other signs of trauma to the body. She'd been in the water at least twenty-four hours, preliminary results indicate death by drowning . . ."

I had pulled up the headphones, tried to turn on the player, and swore when I remembered the battery was gone. If only I could get some music in my head, then maybe I could start to think more clearly.

The talk with Mrs. Harriet Wenlow was a disaster. Twenty minutes of her berating me, warning me that when Mr. Wenlow got home, he would have plenty more to say to me. It took all I had not to tell her what I thought of her, her husband, her home where I got the worst room up over the garage, and the rest of the miserable kids she and her husband so *kindly* took in. All she cared about was the state check that came in each month for my upkeep and care, none of which I had seen in the six weeks I'd been here. I was wearing the same clothes I had arrived with, the same sneakers, and it took every ounce of will to sit there in her perfect kitchen and not reach up and take a copper pan off the overhead rack and whack her on the head with it.

Not that I'd ever do anything like that. I just liked to think about it.

So after she was done and she'd told me to go up to my room and wait for her husband to return, I did just that, and laid out on

the bed—a lumpy army store cot with a few ratty blankets on it—and waited for the battery on the MP3 player to recharge.

"It's perfectly safe. It just makes things better."

When had she said that? Amy, the girl I had so briefly been friends with at the alternative school. Weeks ago? Months? Still, when I'd looked into her soft blue eyes, I didn't believe she'd lie to me. The pills were perfectly safe, exactly as she said, they just took the edge off things.

And, yes, made things better.

Now I stood on the bluffs above Manamesset Bay and Manamesset Beach. An old friend of Mr. Hornton's had given me a ride in his pickup truck, dropped me off at the end of the Briarwood Road. That's basically how I got around now, waiting outside convenience stores for people I knew from Manamesset, people who remembered me as the good boy, little Herbie Sawyer, Sergeant Valari's girlfriend's son, the kid who did odd jobs for Elmer Hornton.

It was Sunday afternoon and almost twenty-four hours since I had pulled the little body out of the bay. There were gulls in the air and the sun was still fairly high in the western sky. There was music beating against the sides of my neck, but I had no desire to pull up the headphones and push them over my ears. Problem was, I cared, but I didn't want to care. I was irritated, too, in a dozen different ways, but still I wanted to know who she was, how she got in the water, and if she fell. Or did someone push her? Did someone hold her under, or knock her unconscious, and dump her over the side of a boat? Or off the jetty . . .

And what about the doll? Why had that girl on the beach told me to get her doll? Who was she? Where was she? That girl and the dead one in the water—were they the same two kids I'd seen on the beach when the woman and man had been arguing? Impossible. I'd seen all that yesterday and the little girl who had drowned had been in the water for at least a day.

And why was the dead girl dressed in just a slip? What kind of parent lets their child run about in her underwear, outside, in the middle of April?

"Herbie."

I turned, startled, on the defense. Who was it now? Jake, following me out there, or the Wenlows, tracking me down, demanding I go back to their house to finish their stupid chores? Or Mr. Hornton, who only lived one street over?

But it was just Jed Porter, one of Jake's officers, and he was walking toward me with a pad of paper in one hand, a cell phone in

the other. He was a tall and lanky sort of fellow with a tangled mess of too-long blond hair that he sometimes pulled back in a ponytail.

"Hey, you got any ideas on this?" he asked, almost jauntily, almost as though the next words out of his mouth were going to be about the striped bass he'd just snagged out of season. "'Cause we're coming up blank no matter what we do. No one lives year round down there," he nodded down at the houses along the sea wall, "except a few retired couples, and none of them saw anything. I went door to door, just to make sure no one's using or renting a house over there, but most of those houses aren't winterized. The workers you talked to didn't see anything, and neither did a couple of real estate agents taking pictures of a house on Briarwood that's going up for sale." He took a breath. "No one was on the beach or in any of the houses fronting the shore at the time you saw those people. Kind of funny, don't you think? And anyhow, they might have had nothing to do with this, right?"

"I guess," I said.

"Well, state forensics says a couple of days, though the medical examiner's office sent us a preliminary, which says—"

"I know what it says."

"Yeah, scraped up a bit, but definitely death from drowning. My theory is she tumbled off the rocks on the jetty, tried to catch herself, cutting up her hands and knee. Just wearing a little slip and barefoot. Dressed like that, you can catch your death . . ." He paused and we stared at each other a long moment, then he added, "I mean, where were the parents?"

I turned away from Jed, looked down the bluff facing east. The houses up above the narrow sea wall were all dark, windows unlit; in many the shades were drawn. On the wide front porches were overturned rocking chairs and other heavy summer furniture. Empty planters lay against stone foundations, and in some yards boats were tied up and covered in heavy canvas.

"People will be opening up their houses soon," I said.

"Yep, and we're contacting all the owners along the sea wall, asking them if they were having any work done, like painting, carpentry, plumbing. Might have been workers in and out who saw something."

"Or did something."

"Yep." Jed's face dropped. He turned to look down the seawall, across the flat beach, now at low tide, and toward Long Jetty. He frowned and said, "We're talking to all the marina owners, too, and folks at the refueling stations. They might have seen a boat, one with kids on it or something."

"So it seems like you're pretty much covering all the bases," I said, amazed that Jed was so obviously matter-of-fact with me. I had assisted Jake with a few similar cases in the past. At sixteen, was I now . . . an equal?

"Well, if you think of anything, any little detail, you let us know, okay?" Jed stuffed a stick of gum in his mouth. He offered me some, but I shook my head. He said, "Most likely it was just a terrible accident, though it's damn odd no one has come forward to report their kid is missing. She'd been in the water at least since Friday. Damn odd." He gave me a funny salute off the top of his cap, then turned and walked in the direction of the seawall.

People do all sorts of odd things. They struggle to straighten out their lives, to get their feet on the ground, to establish themselves in a job, a community, a way of life, and then shuck it all when the going gets just a little too rough. They make excuses, invent reasons, when all it boils down to is a lack of will.

Or was it that simple? Maybe for some people the daily act of waking, moving, eating, breathing, and living is just too much for them to handle, and sometimes they have to abandon, or throw away, the ones they care most about. It's the only way they know to survive.

I rolled over on the lumpy cot, cigarette between my fingers, and studied the short gray roll of ash at its tip. Mrs. Wenlow had a good nose, so I sat up, opened the window, and waved the smoke outside. Then, before I went to sleep, I sat up a while listening to music and thinking about the child who drowned out in Manamesset Bay.

News about the little girl found floating off Long Jetty in the Briarwood section of town was the headline story for a couple of days, then it eventually shifted to page two. They talked about her almost every night on the local news, though, but on the major news channels out of Boston and Providence the story was reduced to a brief "update" near the end of the nightly newscast. About three years old, she had dark brown hair and eyes and was presumed to be Hispanic. Discovered on Saturday, April eighteenth, she died, it was determined, by drowning, having fallen or been placed in the water on or about Thursday, April sixteenth. She had minor scrapes and cuts on the palms of both hands and her right knee, but otherwise she seemed to have been healthy and well nourished. There were no signs of sexual molestation or other bruising or battery. Every property owner along the beachfront and the adjoining community had been questioned; the

adjacent marinas, coves, jetties, and inlets had all been thoroughly searched.

Local fishermen and workmen who were in the area that week had also been questioned. No one had seen or reported anything suspicious. Since it was early spring, some houses were being cleaned and readied for the first influx of summer residents, so the agencies that supplied cleaning services were also questioned. But every line of inquiry drew nothing but blanks.

A local church group offered to bury her, and a private donor paid for her casket, but the funeral was put off, pending identification and notification of kin.

As for me, I got a few jobs through Elmer Hornton. I cleaned out cellars and garages, painted a boat shed, and repaired lobster traps. The days passed slowly, one blending into the other, each indistinguishable from the next. Time felt like some giant cobweb, and I was caught inside of it. I'd work a few hours, think it was time for lunch, find a clock, and see it was only ten A.M. Or the opposite would happen. I'd be painting a corner of a garage wall, yawn, adjust my MP3 player, then realize the whole wall was painted. Monday became Thursday, and I wondered where the week had gone.

But even though I was utterly spent—physical labor having a way of numbing both the mind and the body—I went out to Manamesset Beach each day after work. I stood up on the seawall or walked along the water's edge as far as the battered remnants of Old South Jetty. It was a cold, wet, ragged sort of April vacation and most the houses were still closed up. But in a few there were signs of life: a carpenter installing new windows, a tree crew removing some diseased oaks, a pair of roofers laying down shingle on an older house. There was even the sporadic appearance of cleaning vans with company names painted on them.

Of course, I saw all this through sort of a haze, aware as I played music under my hood that time could weave and drift in astonishing patterns when one was . . .

Well, I liked the way Amy had described it: "*. . . just makes things better.*"

I wasn't addicted. I'd spread out the remaining pills over a couple of weeks; there were now five left. It didn't matter; when they were gone, they were gone.

I rose to my feet off the broken rocks of Old South Jetty and stared across the expanse of beach up toward Long Jetty. Long Jetty had been built to protect the Manamesset River, a river that was vital to the area and its economy, as it supported numerous

private and public docks, as well as several prestigious marinas. As a result, Long Jetty was meticulously maintained and was rebuilt after every storm.

But Old South Jetty had long ago been left to the waves and wind, the storms, tides, and natural currents. In its present condition, Old South did little more than define the southern edge of the thin strip of beach between the two jetties. About twenty vintage cottages sat above the beach's man-made seawall, most of them now dark, with their window shades drawn. These were the summer homes of more than twenty different families who passed the houses down through the generations. This was Briarwood, where houses built and sold for less than a thousand dollars apiece sixty years ago were now worth upwards of a million dollars each.

The solid rhythms of industrial technical music rocked in my brain as I tried, perhaps through sheer will alone, to reason out how it had happened. No, not how. How didn't matter suddenly. How was this: she had fallen off the jetty, the scrapes on her hands and knee attesting to that. She had fallen into the frigid waters and drowned. Her body probably had been submerged about a day, maybe two, before the natural buoyancy of body fat and the gases accompanying decomposition brought her back to the surface. The police and a state forensics team had been all over Long Jetty, all over the beach, and had even dragged the area for more clues, more evidence.

So the "how" was understood, the basic mechanics of her death known. It was the "why" that was still absent. And not why she had died or fallen into the water. There were a dozen possible explanations to that. Children do things for which there are often no reasonable explanations. They go outside to play; they go where it isn't safe, where their curiosity pulls them like a great magnet. Tell them, don't go play on the jetty, then turn your back for a minute, and there they are, on the damn jetty.

The "why" that wasn't answered was this: Why hadn't someone reported her missing? Where had her parents been? The story had been reported statewide and even on the national news programs, and though the police said dozens of inquiries had been made, no match had been made between the child with the long dark hair pulled from Manamesset Bay and the parents who lost her.

Why not?

I popped one of the five remaining pills into my mouth, then figured I'd make a phone call.

"Nope, no, Herbie," Jed Porter told me almost cheerfully on the phone. "There's a couple of staties assigned to it now, and some

dudes out of the county DA's office, but they've come up with zero, zilch, nada . . . Nothing."

"Dudes," I echoed, shaking my head. It was Thursday night, and I was at Mr. Hornton's house again. The Wenlows were less than thrilled that I'd stayed to share fried clams and onion rings with my old friend, but I couldn't care less what they thought.

"Yeah . . ." Jed went on, "We're officially off the case, unless someone comes in with new information, and knowing that area, it isn't too likely. Anyhow, all we can do is pass info along." Jed sounded richly disappointed.

"And have you?" I asked.

"Have we what?" Jed asked, and then he laughed and said, "No, except I did bring in the telephone book lady, but they just listened, said thank you, and sent her on her way."

I had shut my eyes, felt a part of me saying, Let it go tonight. Go watch the ball game and fall asleep on the couch.

"What . . . is a telephone book lady?" I heard myself asking, though it was just an automatic response.

"A telephone book lady?" I could almost hear Jed shrug. "Well, they deliver telephone books. You know how I mean? One of those people who throws your phone book on the front steps where it sits in the rain for a week before you notice it."

I sat up straight as Elmer Hornton swore at the TV set; he was watching the Red Sox. "I know what you mean," I said. "What did this . . . telephone book lady have to say?"

"Well, that she was delivering on Briarwood last week and she saw a woman crying, but she wasn't sure of the day. She couldn't remember the house either, or much about it."

"A woman crying?" I looked down at the ancient, push-button phone, and asked Jed, "Any way I can talk to her, Jed?"

It was the following day, Friday, and I'd never seen a woman move and twitch so much as this one.

"I don't know why I bothered to go to the police," Mindy Marker said. She was struggling to hold onto the large white Persian cat in her arms. There was another cat curling around her ankles, and more in her cluttered trailer. There were cats and trash, cats and magazines, cats and empty fast food containers everywhere.

"I just thought, well maybe, oh who knows . . ." She twisted her arms back and forth, her shoulders trembled. In the cramped living room, Jed and I sat on the edge of a wrinkled couch that obviously doubled as a bed. She released the cat at last—or it released her—and it flew into the air, across the room, and into my lap.

It was filthy; it smelled of urine, but there it was, in my lap.

I felt pretty good, though, amazed at the fact that I was here on sheer curiosity. I picked up the animal and held it to my chest, then looked at the woman who, as Jed had explained to me beforehand, had Parkinson's disease. "That's probably why she wasn't taken seriously," he'd said, "but that doesn't mean she hasn't got a brain and doesn't notice things. Mindy takes care of herself and accepts help from anybody, and she came into the station to try to be helpful, but they gave her barely two minutes of their time."

"... Well, I had about twenty phone books left," Mindy was saying, "so I must have been near the end of Rollins Road, just going onto Briarwood—"

"Twenty books," I muttered to myself.

"—And I saw her crying, so I stopped." Her speech was as erratic as her body movements, but I didn't see her body, strangely enough, although it was there, moving, jerking, twisting. "And I said, hey, how are you, and can I be of help? Because I feel we're all put on God's green earth to be of service to one another."

"Do you have records of your deliveries?" I interjected politely.

"Well, just a check-off sheet, address, and date and how much I get. I get more when I deliver rural, you know, and I do go up to each door, but in that part of town, nobody answers."

"Did she—this crying woman—answer a door?"

"She was outside the house by the side door. No one answered the front. . . . Now I remember—" Mindy frowned. "She had her hands on her face, so I asked if I could help, and then this fella came out and said, no, no, she's okay, and so I went back to my car. But I heard them talking, and they weren't talking English. The lady was real upset. I told those detectives—" She jerked her head toward Jed. "—I told them they were speaking Spanish or something, but they just said thank you and sent me away." She suddenly leaned forward and looked intently at me "My kitty likes you, young man."

"You were on Briarwood Road?" Jed asked. "Do you know the address where you saw this woman?"

"I don't remember, as I told them. But I do know I had twenty books left in my car." She looked at me and then at Jed. "They're tied up in piles of ten and I had two piles left. I was near the end of my route. They didn't ask how many books I had left."

"Can we see your records?" I asked.

I counted back twenty books, and then started writing down the addresses of the houses Mindy delivered phone books to, which brought me to Thursday, April sixteenth.

About forty minutes later I was standing on Briarwood Road, the list in my hand and the sounds of gothic metal ricocheting against my neck. I blinked my eyes a couple of times because I had an uncanny sense of being here before, but then, that was a feeling I'd been living with for the last few months. In fact, it occurred to me then that I wasn't even sure what day . . .

"It's perfectly safe; it just makes things better."

I reached in my jeans pocket, wound my fingers around the foil packet. Four left.

There were eighteen houses up on the seawall overlooking North Manamasset Beach. Eighteen houses.

Now I had to figure which one to break into.

In the end it was fairly easy. The massive late Victorian had been the only house without a phone book on the grass or the steps. As for getting in, I'd used the same trick I had at my own house: I cut the edge of a screen on the porch overlooking the beach. Now I was sitting at a freshly polished rolltop desk—I could still smell the lemon-scented cleaner used on it—in a room which had been converted into some kind of study.

Yes, quite a nice room, up on the second floor, overlooking the beach, the bay, the two jetties at either end of the beach. The room had all new windows, a skylight, and a brand-new telescope to gawk at people down on the beach. Heck, it was obvious this owner had money by the way the hardwood floors were gleaming, and the bookcases and every knickknack on them were polished.

I was fairly certain that this was the house where Mindy Marker had seen the crying woman, and with a leap from that one assumption to the fantastic . . . that she might also be the same woman I'd seen arguing with the man at the water's edge last Saturday.

I needed that woman's name, and the only people who could possibly supply me with that were the owners of this house. Information, possibly, they had withheld from the police.

So I sat and thought for a few minutes. I looked around at the perfect—almost too perfect—Cape Cod surroundings: a harpoon on a wall, some mosaics made from sea glass, some freshly polished lanterns on hooks along the rustic, gray-colored wood paneling. Barnboard?

I got up and walked over to the wall and ran my hand along it. It was rough, worn, authentic. Then a light went on, even in my foggy brain: real barnboard walls, the harpoon, and the lanterns gleaming against the wall. I looked back at the rolltop desk. It was old, expensive, antique.

Everything here was absolutely authentic. Not a reproduction among them, including a glass case with a few items of scrimshaw and some handmade kaleidoscopes. These people had gone to great lengths to create a decorator-perfect Cape Cod summer home.

I suddenly knew how to make the owners tell me what I wanted to know.

"Yes, ma'am, everyone says I have a young-sounding voice," I said on the phone. I was turning the business card which I'd found in the rolltop desk in my fingers. "But we're calling you about—"

She cut me off, sounding stern, correct, and every ounce the up-and-coming young lawyer she was. Worked at a huge Boston firm. Time was important to her, didn't I understand that? And hadn't she, and her husband, also a lawyer with a very old, very prominent firm just north of Boston, already answered all the Manamesset Police Department's questions? What could be so important—

I turned in Mr. Hornton's recliner, mindful that the shower was still going in his bathroom. I'd grabbed a ride off one of his friends, who dropped me at the nearby corner convenience store. In the parking lot, I'd stolen a cell phone off the passenger seat of an unlocked pickup truck. The owner would notice his phone missing and disconnect it any minute now, so I had to talk fast.

My turn to cut her off, so politely maple sugar would have melted in my mouth. "This is a different matter, ma'am. We think there might have been a robbery at your house on Briarwood. We've taken the liberty of driving over there just now, and we can see no signs of forced entry, however we have recovered . . ." I looked at the fancy kaleidoscope next to Mr. Hornton's ancient phone, "Some items that we think might have come from your home, including several pieces of scrimshaw."

That saying about hearing a person's jaw drop was pretty true because I heard a clunk. Maybe it was her jaw, maybe she just dropped something in her fancy lawyer's office.

"Oh my God, a break-in? I told Bob we needed a security system on that house!"

"Didn't say a break-in, ma'am," I went on, oozing syrup that could have covered a stack of pancakes. "We believe whoever went into your house—if indeed these items are yours—might have had a key, so if you could tell me if any of the following items—"

"Key!" she gasped over my voice as I recited a list of items.

"A Jason telescope, several antique lanterns, a whale harpoon

... "I intended to name practically every item that a Mr. or Mrs. Stevens, esquires both, might esteem to have some value.

She suddenly blurted out: "Oh my God, I *told* Bob not to hire those people!"

"What people, Mrs. Stevens?" I said, realizing I had to catch her in her highest moment of distress.

"Um . . . oh, just a housekeeping service," she muttered. "My husband and I will be down to the station as fast as we can, Officer . . . I didn't catch your name?"

"We don't seem to have the name of this service," I said gently, softly. There was silence on the other end, so I said, "Mrs. Stevens?"

I settled back in the recliner, took a breath. Mr. Hornton was still in the bathroom; I could hear him swear and the sound of his walker banging against something.

"Mrs. Stevens?" I repeated.

"Well, I have just a phone number. I'm sure Robert mentioned this earlier when you were inquiring about that little girl and—"

I cut her off, "Well, perhaps these items aren't yours," I said, holding my breath. "Did I mention we also recovered a kaleidoscope with the inscription: 'To Bob, with love from Meg?'"

The cell phone was still working so I quickly placed another call and told the voice on the other end what I wanted, the address of my house, and said that the door would be left open. There was a pause, so I added, "We want the same woman who did the Stevens place on Briarwood. They've highly recommended her. They say she did an exceptional job."

I heard the suspicion in his heavily accented voice as he echoed, "The Stevenses?"

"Look, we're in a hurry. We need the house cleaned so we can show it to a prospective buyer tomorrow afternoon. You'll see our sign on the side lawn. We're prepared to pay above your regular rate."

I seem to have said the right combination of words because his whole tone changed as he said, "Seven o'clock tomorrow morning. We'll be there."

After I hung up, I walked to the end of Mr. Hornton's road, out to the end of the boat landing there, and threw the cell phone in the water.

I leaned against a tree and watched from across the street in the fog as the small van pulled up. It was white, rusted in the back, and from it emerged a woman and a small girl with dark hair

twisted into two neat braids. I wished I had a cigarette, but I settled for the foil packet in my jeans pocket. I chugged the pill down with the coke I'd taken out of Mr. Hornton's fridge.

She was small, dark haired, maybe late twenties to early thirties. She wore a sweat suit and dark raincoat and carried a bucket in one hand, a plastic bag in the other. Cleaning supplies. The bare-legged child had on a little orange rain slicker; she must have been wearing a dress or skirt.

And as I stood there, I marveled on how simple things were when you dragged yourself down to the most basic, banal level you possibly could. I knew that level, knew it was almost subterranean. I had no doubt, watching her walk carefully up to my house, pausing to study the FOR SALE sign, which I had taken off a different property up the street, complete with the message that there was to be a "Special Showing Today"—that this was the woman I had seen on the beach. Most likely this was also the woman Mindy Marker had seen crying the day she was delivering phone books.

I blinked as the effect started to kick in and I felt nervous, trembled. Though not all the details were falling into place as easily as I'd hoped. For one thing, I'd seen the woman, the man, and the two kids the afternoon of Saturday, April eighteenth, and the child had been in the water since at least Thursday, according to the autopsy report. So maybe that child and these people weren't connected after all . . .

It didn't matter. I could sort out the details later—or Jake could. I just knew this was her, the woman who had cleaned the Stevens place on Briarwood Road, the woman whom Mrs. Stevens—or her husband—hadn't told the police about.

But what I wasn't sure of was whether this was the woman, now walking toward the house with a small child in tow, who hadn't reported her missing daughter to the police.

I crossed the street and followed her up the stairs into my house.

There was a moment where everything came back into focus, like a burst of clarity, starting at the back of my brain, then shooting forward and centering behind my eyes. I was on the jetty again, listening to my music, headphones on, hood up over my head, and I was looking toward the beach.

An empty beach last Saturday. No one had been there. Not her, this small, rather frail-looking woman who was pushing the light switch on the wall up and down, up and down. She heard me and spun around.

But despite that, I said, "I saw you."

She dropped the bucket in her hand and grabbed the child, pulling her close to her side as I stared at her in my empty kitchen.

"The day you cleaned the Stevens place on Briarwood Road. I saw you out on the beach." I blinked hard and looked away and I could hear her breathing fast, frantic, afraid. I looked back at her. "You were arguing with some guy."

"No, no . . ." The woman was shaking her head. "I do not know what it is you talk about." She had an accent, but it wasn't Mexican or Puerto Rican. I couldn't place it.

"Damn," I muttered.

"Please, can we go? I do not think anyone wants this house cleaned," she said in a trembling voice.

"And you . . ." I directed my attention to the little girl. She was about five, and was looking up at me with a fierce, but unfrightened intensity. "You asked me to get your doll. You asked—" I looked at the woman again. She was drawing back, shaking her head, trembling. "—But I didn't." I swallowed hard and saw myself pulling up my hood while music rolled against my neck. Then I had turned and walked off up the beach.

"You didn't get my doll, mister," the child said to me as the woman tried to draw her away from me. "You told me no."

"But she . . ." I said, but the child was right; I had told her no and walked off up the beach that day. It suddenly became all too clear what had happened, to me, to her, to the other child, the one I'd taken out of the bay. "She tried to get it, didn't she?" I stepped forward and the mother shrank back on quivering legs. I stooped down and looked into the girl's bright, dark eyes. "What is her name?"

"Cora," the child told me. "Cora went to get my doll."

The woman was barely able to stand and fell back against the small kitchen table.

I raised my head to look at her as I asked the child, "And who is Cora?"

"My little sister," the child said.

"Jed Porter wants to know what the hell is wrong with people," Jake said to me. He was lighting a cigarette, but since I had my own vices, I didn't feel it necessary to criticize his. I walked down to the sea wall, stood on its edge, facing Old South Jetty. Farther up, Long Jetty was just barely visible in the distance. The fog had never really lifted today. In the distance we could hear the bells of St. John's announcing eleven o'clock mass.

"What did you tell him?" I asked.

"I'm trying to figure out what to tell Meg and Bob Stevens when

they show up to claim the things you say were 'robbed' from their summer house."

"Tell them they're in trouble for hiring illegal aliens to clean their house."

He frowned at me, and for a moment I wasn't sure how angry he was.

"They didn't tell you about Rosa Carera, did they?" Jake didn't reply, so I went on, "Oh, they're going to say they didn't know Rosa was illegal; they didn't know she brought her two small children on jobs, and that the guy they hired her through has a racket going where he brings women into the country to work as maids, housekeepers, and other jobs for below minimum wage. Say all that and they won't give a damn that some unidentified person—" I pulled a handful of loose gravel out of the crumbling sea wall. "—told them they'd been robbed."

"Yeah, they're going to need a lawyer," Jake said, but with effort. There was no humor in his words, his face. Quite simply, none of this was funny. "Rosa Carera worked at their place on Wednesday and Thursday, April fifteenth and sixteenth. But how, Herbie? How did you . . . ?"

"The only person who won't report a missing child is someone who has everything to lose by doing so. Rosa Carera risked being sent back to Colombia, and with this guy's operation in jeopardy, even worse from him if she went to the police. That argument I saw, she was just asking the guy to go out in the skiff to look for the doll. But he had no intention of doing that." I looked out to the bay. "That was on Wednesday. *Wednesday* afternoon. The next day Rosa returned to finish the job, and at some point she put both girls down for a nap. But while she was washing windows and polishing floors, little Cora got up and went out on her own to look for her older sister's doll. She fell off the jetty. That was on Thursday, probably early afternoon."

"But things still don't fit," Jake said as he came to stand next to me on the seawall. I could feel his anger—at a woman whose fear kept her from reporting her missing daughter to the police, at the affluent couple reluctant to admit they hired an illegal alien to clean their house, and even, at me. "You saw those people arguing last Saturday, and the kid, the little girl asked you to get her doll on—"

I cut him off, "No, Jake. I didn't see them on Saturday."

"Herbie? Look, we've got your statement—"

Again I interrupted, "I got everything mixed up. I saw the man and woman arguing on the fifteenth, Wednesday afternoon. It was a clear, bright day, and then when I was out on the jetty last

Saturday . . ." Now it was my turn to tremble, like Rosa Carera had done when I confronted her with the awful truth in my kitchen. "I was confused. I thought I saw them then, but I was remembering them from a few days earlier."

"How is that possible?" he asked.

I just stared at him, my eyes unblinking, then said, "I don't know."

But I did . . . *"It's perfectly safe; it just makes things better."*

Only it didn't, not at all. It only makes things *seem* better.

I turned away from Jake as he said, "You're on something, aren't you? Pills?" But strangely so, there was no roughness or condemnation in his tone.

"No," I answered very evenly. "Just got a lot on my mind lately." I swallowed and turned back to him. There was gravel running out of both my hands.

"So, the mother, Rosa, she was just asking the guy to go out and look around the jetty for the doll," I heard myself saying. "Same thing the older girl asked me to do a little while later. But I looked at her, and I said no." My voice got softer. "That was on Wednesday, Jake, not Saturday."

"Herbie, this is not your fault," Jake said.

But it was as though his voice came from a million miles away. I was already headed for the beach below, muttering as I did, "I said no." 🐘

Solution to the September "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

| | | |
|---------------|----------------|---------------|
| A. Childish | I. Patties | R. Nominees |
| B. Together | J. Easter | S. House |
| C. Attitude | K. Awkwardly | T. Emoted |
| D. Yugoslavia | L. Cubbyhole | U. Rhinoceros |
| E. Lazy Susan | M. Hottentot | V. Orchestra |
| F. Obsolete | N. Yellow Flag | W. Inquired |
| G. Rhythms | O. Kissinger | X. Newspaper |
| H. Aesthete | P. Esther | Y. Eggbeater |
| | Q. Emerges | |

QUOTATION

Author—C(harles) TAYLOR

Work—A PEACHY-KEEN HEROINE (*Newsday*, May 21, 2006)

"Mystery is sometimes thought of as a macho genre, but . . . the sleuths readers love best are rarely the . . . swaggering type. Nothing endears a sleuth to readers like the ability to respond to trouble with a good wisecrack, especially when the squeeze is on."

MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

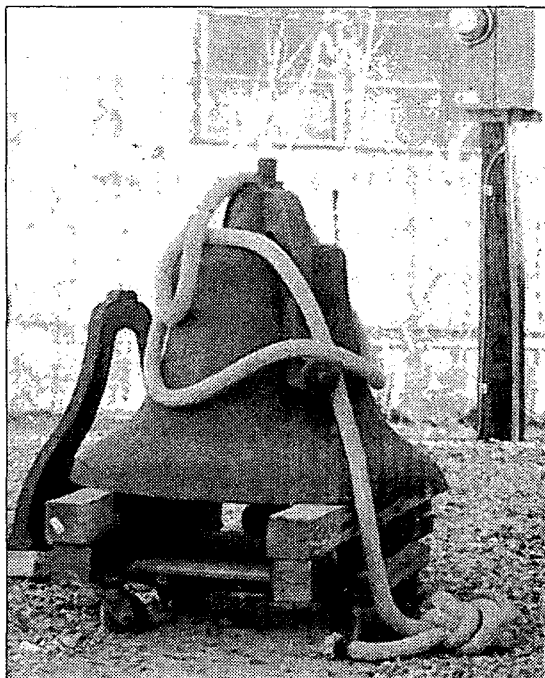


Photo by Myrna J. Yancey

For Whom?

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "October Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the April Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 140.

REEL CRIME

J. RENTILLY

There's murder, sure—usually crimes of passion, impulsive slaughter, typically directed at someone you know. And then there's serial killing, which experts suggest is more meticulous, calculated, usually a ghoulish acting-out of childhood trauma. According to government statistics, the United States boasts nearly four hundred serial killers in the past hundred and fifty years, claiming nearly four *thousand* victims, the vast majority of which were total strangers. (Of those serial killers, it may be worth noting—even if it's not easily explained—that eighty percent of them have cropped—er, chopped—up in the last twenty-five years).

The last quarter century has also produced a glut of serial killer films as well, including two of the newest: *The Midnight Meat Train* and *Righteous Kill*.



The Midnight Meat Train. Photo by Saeed Adyani, courtesy Lion's Gate.

From horror fiction maestro Clive Barker (*Hellraiser*) comes a new take on serial killers, *The Midnight Meat Train*. Expect plenty of slicing and dicing, but a fair amount of psychological terror, too, in this story of a New York City photographer hunting a serial killer who strikes subway travelers.

Starring Bradley Cooper (*Alias*), Leslie Bibb (*Iron Man*), and Vinnie Jones (*X-Men: The Last Stand*).

In *Righteous Kill*, Robert De Niro and Al Pacino team up again on the big screen. Directed by Jon Avnet, *Righteous Kill* is a thriller about a pair of cops investigating a spate of serial killings in a big city, with a major twist: one of the cops may actually be the killer.

"The term 'serial killer' only entered into popular usage in the mid 1980s," says Peter Vronsky, historian and author of *Serial Killers: The Method and Madness of Monsters*, a definitive history of serial homicide, "yet American cinema has always been fascinated

with serial killing long before we gave it a name and a concept." Herein, with the assistance of Vronsky, we survey the notorious killers now out on DVD.

John Doe in *Seven*. With a shaved scalp and a bowed head that oozes menace and categorically refuses contrition, Kevin Spacey's John Doe is, for our money, the spookiest serial killer ever committed to celluloid. He's a devious, diabolical, methodical, and calm slaughtering machine, plying his craft with inspiration from the Bible's list of seven deadly sins. Trivia: Both REM lead singer Michael Stipe and *Full Metal Jacket's* sadistic drill sergeant R. Lee Ermey were considered for the role of John Doe.

Henry in *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*. If imposing, gravel-voiced actor Michael Rooker hadn't made such a compelling psycho killer in this horrifying—and sometimes horrifyingly real—film, then he might be working a whole lot more today. Loosely based on real-life serial killer Henry Lee Lucas, this film's release was delayed three years while its makers appealed the X rating it had been given. Nearly twenty years later, it's still scary and shocking as hell. "Its portrayal of the brutal rape murders (committed by Henry) earned the film an X rating at the time," says Vronsky. "Its non-Hollywood production values and X rating prevented the film from any significant distribution when it was released in 1990, but it's a good one."

Norman Bates in *Psycho*. Cinematically speaking, Norman Bates—brought to the screen by Alfred Hitchcock—is the quintessential serial killer—an effete, mother-obsessed ornithologist and hotel manager with a proclivity for voyeurism and a certain skill for disguise and cutlery. Played to perfection by Anthony Perkins, and then played to death in three sequels, Norman Bates is an icon of American cinema, perhaps its most famous serial killer. Trivia: Robert Bloch's source novel was itself inspired by real life serial killer Ed Gein, who was also a starting point for serial killers in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Silence of the Lambs*, and *Deranged*. "This is the classic breakthrough serial killer film. Norman Bates popularized the mother/son conflict lurking behind the childhood of so many serial killers," says Vronsky.

Jigsaw in *Saw*. Directed by James Wan and reportedly shot in a record eighteen days for loose change, *Saw* unleashed puppet-loving, contraption-obsessed "Jigaw" (Tobin Bell) on the collective consciousness. Three sequels followed, with a fifth installment due next Halloween. Driven by an Old Testament urge to tor-



ture victims into good behavior, Jigsaw is a merciless, vengeful creature. The film barely squeaked out of an NC-17 rating and it still haunts our dreams, to be sure.

Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs*. This character was merely evil, a cold, clinical, brilliant mind—a detached, deranged, but collected psychiatrist/mass murderer with a taste for human flesh and devious psychological warfare. Hannibal Lecter, as played to Oscar-winning perfection by Anthony Hopkins, has no special power; he does not come from a comic book. He is a human being, and that's the scariest thing of all. Trivia: Anthony Hopkins, who has played the role three times, says his portrayal of Lecter is "a combination of Truman Capote and Katharine Hepburn." "This was a huge Hollywood hit," says Vronsky. "[It] introduced the notion of the ' profiler' as a serial killer's investigative nemesis."

Aileen Wournos in *Monster*. Wournos may be the world's best-known female serial killer. According to FBI stats, only sixteen percent of serial killers in history have been women. Patty Jenkins's indie film about Wournos is most famous for uglying up South African beauty Charlize Theron, a hat trick that earned the actress an Academy Award. Viewed together with Nick Broomfield's illuminating documentary, *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer*, you get a one-two punch about what happens when the, uh, weaker sex goes homicidal. Trivia: Notoriously tempestuous, Wournos nevertheless uncorked thousands of letters and diary entries for filmmaker Jenkins, no doubt adding to the film's authenticity.

Catherine Trammel in *Basic Instinct*. Sharon Stone plays a beautiful female serial killer in this slick '90s thriller, which feverishly mixes hot-blooded sexuality with graphic violence. It's a Freudian romp through male paranoia, insecurity, and impotence, brought to you by Dutch director Paul Verhoeven (*Robocop*, *Hollow Man*) and gazillion-dollar screenwriter Joe Eszterhas. Stone's icy, aloof, and hyper-sexualized serial killer is every man's dream come true in the bedroom—until the ice pick comes out, that is. (The sequel, released in 2006, is equally deadly).

Ted Bundy in *The Deliberate Stranger*. Mark Harmon hits all the right notes of charming, handsome, and deadly in this cinematic take on the hunt for charming, handsome, and deadly serial killer Ted Bundy, whose reign of terror—and trail of female bodies—stretched across three state lines in the mid seventies. Despite being a made for TV film, *The Deliberate Stranger* is provocative, intelligent, and occasion-

ally terrifying, due in large part to Harmon's against-type performance as Bundy, ostensibly a law student and rising local politician. (The film was initially broadcast in 1986, the same year *People* magazine dubbed nice-guy Harmon its "sexiest man alive.") "For more on Bundy, you've got to read Ann Rule's *The Stranger Beside Me*, the definitive true-crime account of Ted Bundy," says Vronsky. "It never actually uses the term 'serial killer,' despite the fact that her book quintessentially defines the postmodern serial killer."

Freddy Krueger. By the time Freddy Krueger was hatched from the sick, fertile brain of filmmaker Wes Craven in 1984's *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, the cardinal rule of slasher films was well established: If you have sex or smoke or do drugs or enjoy yourself in any way at all, you will perish at the hands of a faceless, mute killing machine. Ah, but Krueger—played with sassy, perverted wit by Robert Englund—kicks it up a notch. This is a monster with a purpose, with soul, with a backstory, and he's a deadly, virtually unstoppable villain who can infiltrate your dreams and kill you while you sleep. The killing machines in *Friday the 13th* (Jason Voorhees), *Halloween* (Michael Myers), and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Leatherface) follow the same game plan—occasionally, if you're Leatherface, throwing in a little cannibalism as a side dish. Technically speaking, they're not serial killers, but the body counts—and entertainment value, if this happens to be your cup of tea—are high.



Freddy vs. Jason. Photo courtesy New Line.

The Zodiac Killer in *Zodiac*. David Fincher's claustrophobic, intellectual look at the hunt for the Bay Area's still-uncaught serial killer is an instant classic. According to screenwriter James Vanderbilt, Fincher wasn't interested in making another serial killer film: "He was interested in making the *last* serial killer film." Though a new round of serial killers are always headed for the multiplex, Fincher may have made the best of the lot, ever. Trivia: In Clint Eastwood's *Dirty Harry*, Harry Callahan hunts the Scorpio Killer, an echo of the real Zodiac killer. So convincing was actor Andrew Robinson's portrayal of the film's serial killer, that he received several death threats after the its release and had to change his telephone number.



THE QUICK BROWN FOX

ROBERT S. LEVINSON

T*he quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.
The quick brown dog jumps over the lazy fox.
The lazy brown dog—*

As far as Gus Ebersole got before deleting the most words he had put on the computer screen in the fifteen, no, now sixteen months he'd been fighting the good fight against writer's block.

Writer's block, hell.

He was suffering a doomsday bomb that had exploded in his head while he slept, taking out those parts of the brain responsible for creativity. The right side. No, the left side. One of the sides. He'd know which if it were still functioning, instead of the side he was stuck with, now, the side forcing him to consider abandoning his writing career, check Craigslist for work more suited to his current mental status.

He thought about McDonald's, maybe the kitchen assembly line, squirting on the mustard and the ketchup, layering the beef patties with tomatoes and lettuce; or maybe manning the deep fry, pumping out those devilishly delicious, blood-congealing Frenchies, and—

Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country.

Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of Gus Ebersole.

Now is the time for all brown dogs—

The cell phone sang out, interrupting his train of thought.

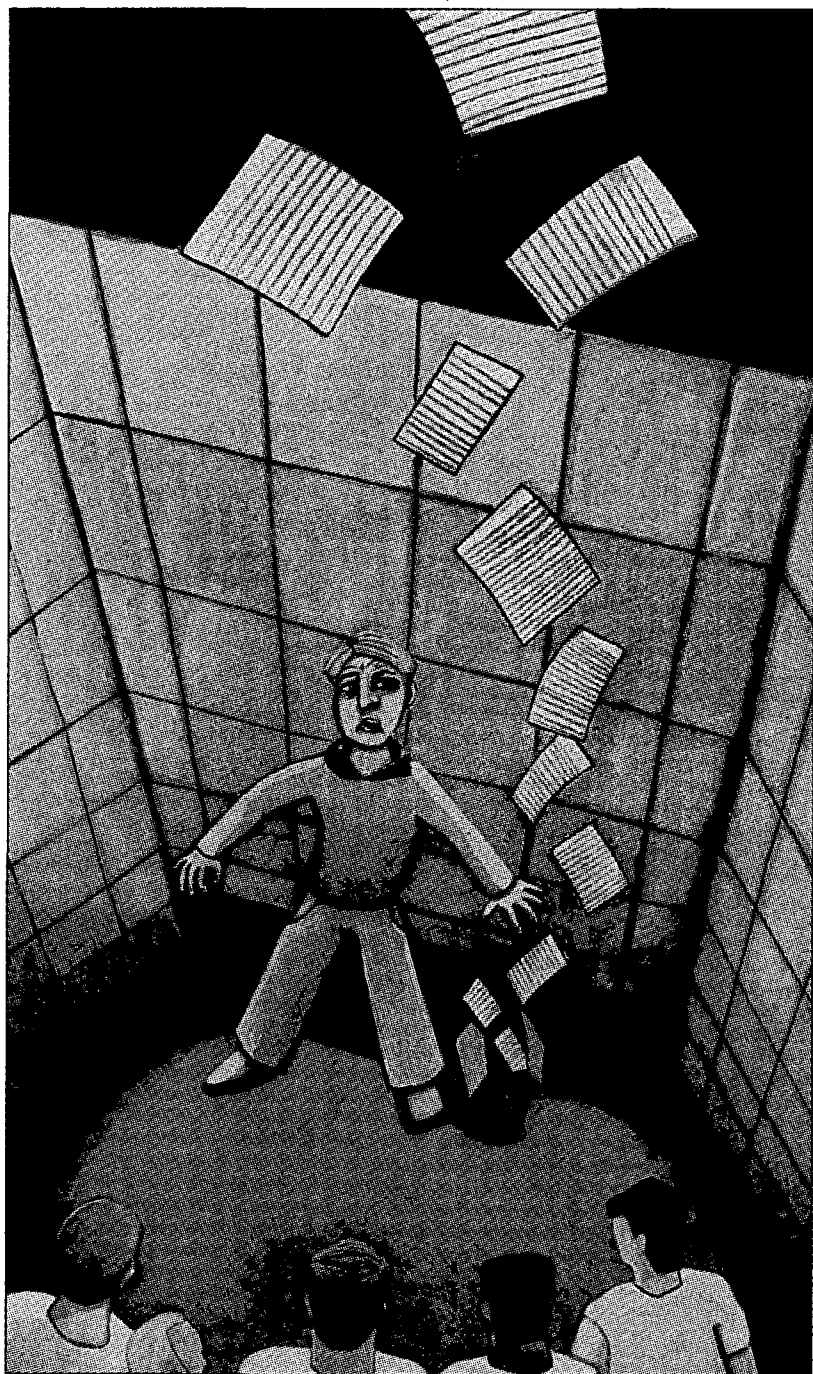
He punched on hungrily, happy for the distraction.

Nobody he knew.

A Commander Dennis Foley of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Correctional Services Division apologizing for his call at what might be an inconvenient time, in a nicotine-damaged voice that reeked of authority.

"I am in the middle of something," Ebersole said, "but I'm never too busy for those who protect and serve."

"A new story in your Inspector Phogg series, I hope."



"Possibly the greatest adventure of the inspector's life," Ebersole said, flattered by this proof he hadn't been entirely forgotten or forsaken since the creative well turned drier than the Mojave.

"Wonderful, he's my favorite, even more than grand old Mrs. Marlowe, although it's hard for me to imagine how you'll ever be able to top the last Phogg, *Strangers on a Plane*. Been what, two or three years since I read it in *Crime & Punishment Magazine*? Or anything, not even another Bogey Brothers, L.L.C."

Ebersole muttered something about interrupting the flow of short stories to focus on a novel and pushed the commander to explain the reason for his call.

"Over to our Men's Central Jail, got a classroom full of wannabe writers looking for a pro to steer them in the right direction—no pun intended—and my first thought naturally was you, Mr. Ebersole. An hour or two at one of the Tuesday or Thursday meetings would sure do the trick."

Ebersole hummed his way through a minute, playing at having to think hard about the invitation, masking his delight over this unexpected excuse to avoid, even if for only a couple of hours, the torture of staring at a blank, snow white computer screen, unable to untangle ideas he once translated so effortlessly into a tale well told.

"It doesn't pay much," the commander said, misinterpreting his silence. "An honorarium certainly nowhere close to what your time must be worth, sir."

"Hmmmm . . . Send it to your memorial foundation, Commander Foley. I'm honored to *accept* and to *serve*," Ebersole said. *Accept and to serve*. Wordplay on law enforcement's motto. A positive omen the fires of creativity still burned inside him, yes?

Yes!

No McDonald's for Gus Ebersole, not yet, anyway.

Ebersole reached Men's Central Jail during morning visiting hours and angled his SUV into the reserved space waiting for him a half block away in the public parking lot on Bauchet Street, a mangy stretch of street within sight of the 101 and 110 freeways, full of stiff-backed law enforcement personnel and a United Nations of civilians who'd come to share time with inmates at Central or its neighbor across the way, the Twin Towers Correctional Facility, a complex built and christened before its name took on a significance far more tragic than any story any prisoner could tell.

He was no stranger to his surroundings, but it had been six or eight years since his last visit to Central, a research tour that

formed the basis for his series of "High Security" stories. Twin Towers was no country club, but it was Central, the largest jail in the free world, where they housed the high-risk population.

Commander Foley was waiting at the check-in desk, looking nothing like he'd sounded on the phone, in a uniform that might have fit him twenty pounds ago, his ear-to-ear smile half lost under a thick salt-and-pepper mustache that fit above his mouth like a limp hot dog.

He shook Ebersole's hand like he was pumping for water and led him off and briefed him on the writing class members during the ten minutes it took to reach the meeting room, a space about ten by twelve feet, the walls bare except for a green chalkboard mounted behind a scarred teacher's desk fronting a semicircle of cheap student tablet chair-desks.

Applause greeted their arrival, led by an inmate in the white top and blue bottom uniform combination that identified him as a trustee. He'd been using the teacher's desk as his own. He was in his mid-to-late sixties, maybe five five or six feet in height and a hundred twenty pounds on a rail-thin frame, his angelic face home to a halo of hair, as bedsheet white as his complexion, hanging in a knotted braid past his shoulder blades.

He matched Foley's description of Chester "Smiley" Burdette. A career criminal halfway through a ten-year sentence for first-degree armed robbery, and one of dozens of prisoners transferred to Central when the county ended its contract with the state.

"Smiley's also a fan of yours and the one who's been fronting the program since he got here," Foley had said. "He's first-rate when it comes to keeping the others in line, if anyone gets out of line for any reason."

"Like what kind of reason?"

"You never know until it happens," Foley said.

"If you're trying to scare me, Commander, it's working."

"Just making conversation, Mr. Ebersole. We haven't lost an author yet." He showed off his smile again. "Of course, there's always a first time," he said, turning his smile into a burst of laughter and giving Ebersole's shoulder a series of reassuring pats.

Ebersole was not reassured.

He thought about canceling out then and there, fleeing Central Jail, but that would have meant returning home to a blank computer screen.

Ebersole wrote his name on the board in large block letters and launched into a lengthy introduction, sparing his audience no adjective or noun that enhanced his reputation and standing in

the literary fraternity; much of what he said was true.

Then it was their turn.

Smiley Burdette went first, playing his own history like stand-up comedy, drawing his biggest laughs describing the armed robbery that got him back behind bars. "Was meant to be burglary, which is my specialty," he said. "Climbed into the Bar None through a window off the alley, not thinking to check first if the joint was still open for business. It was, so that made my burglary a robbery and how I found myself staring down the barrel of the barkeep's twin-gauge. My priors turned my sentence into five years times two, so here I am, my swan song to a home away from home."

He took a bow and spread his arms grandly to the applause he'd generated from seven of the eight other inmates.

"Plain stupid, you ask me," said the lone dissenter, earning a unanimous chorus of hisses as he dismissed Burdette with a throwaway gesture.

Burdette said, "I didn't ask, but you definitely are, Cooke. Nothing's more stupid than a dirty cop who gets caught stepping over the line. You bend over a lot in the shower or why else do they let you out of segregation and into the general pop for our class?"

Al Cooke pushed up from his seat, unfolding a six-foot frame and a weightlifter's ripple of muscles inside the orange uniform that identified a connection to law enforcement. He reared back, fists clenched, cold-cocking Burdette with his pit bull eyes, and stepped toward him.

Burdette rose to the challenge and egged Cooke forward with his hands.

Two of the inmates leaped to their feet and blocked Cooke's way, while another latched onto Burdette's arm and urged him to shut up and settle down, insisting, "Smiley, a DRB or the hole's nothing you need right now."

The air remained heavy with acrimony. Burdette and Cooke grunted between labored breaths, neither man showing any inclination to step away from a fight and be seen as a loser.

Ebersole wiped at the fright sweat blanketing his forehead and upper lip and reached over to press the call button installed on the underside of the desk. It would bring guards running, the commander had told him.

Burdette recognized the move and shook his head at Ebersole.

Pumped a laugh to the ceiling and sank into his chair.

Said, "Only playacting, Mr. Ebersole, maybe give you something to write about in one of your Bogey Brothers stories. Our way of

showing our thanks for your being here today, ain't that so, Cookie?"

Cooke hesitated before answering. "Why not?" he said, and waved off the inmates who had blocked his access to Burdette. "What's to know about me, I'll make it short and sweet. I'm a bad cop who got caught, honored the Blue Wall and refused to turn state's, got sentenced to the max, and is now sitting out an appeal hearing among this bunch of losers." A cacophony of nasty sounds erupted. Cooke answered them with a wagging upright middle finger. "I've been writing a book I'm calling *Cop-Out*."

"*Cop-In* more like it," somebody said, winning applause.

Cooke ignored the interruption. "So I went and scored this program hoping to maybe pick up a handy hint or three along the way from a writer like you," he said, and sat down.

Ebersole thanked him and pointed to an inmate who'd seemed more interested in playing with his fingernails than being in the class. Early-to-mid forties, Coke-bottle glasses on an otherwise ordinary face.

He didn't bother standing but remained focused on his nails. "Name's Bob Rauschenberg, no relation to the painter of the same name," he said, like he was sharing a state secret. "Been writing all my life. Checks mainly. What helped get me here. What I call *creative enterprise*, others call forgery." He blew on his nails, brushed them on his uniform, and signaled he was through.

"Who'd like to speak next?" Ebersole said, any fears for his personal safety erased by the realization these inmates were a garden of story ideas ripe for picking.

He listened to their histories with a growing intensity, anxious for the session to end so he could tell Commander Foley he wanted to return, not just once, but as often as the inmates would have him.

Five of the inmates were genuinely interested in writing. They were the ones who asked the questions. The others were using the program to kill time or as an alternative to sweating in the kitchen or laundry or off sewing prison gear. They were the ones who seemed to sleep with their eyes open, whose breath stank of pruno, the illegal alcoholic drink made in their cells from fermented food.

Ebersole was supposed to report the fakers and the flakes—that's how the system worked—but a short story Ricardo Ramirez read during his second visit was all the convincing he needed to ignore the mandate. Ricardo, who hid a high IQ under a body load of gang tats, had written in near-flawless prose about

an execution-style killing on an afternoon when black clouds hung over the exercise yard—blood and guts spilled by a kid doing drug time, who ratted out a gang member for snatching his fish kit and won a snitch's reward, a shiv fashioned from a toothbrush handle drilled into his carotid artery after it ripped open his belly.

The verisimilitude of the story made Ebersole wonder if it was fact wrapped in fiction, and if Ricardo perhaps was the convict who had wielded the homemade weapon, but those were not questions he asked. That would have been inviting Ricardo to snitch on himself, a thought that amused Ebersole as much as he was excited by his plan to rewrite the story in his vaunted style and submit it to *Crime & Punishment Magazine*.

Nothing he'd mention to Ricardo, of course.

That would be like Gus Ebersole snitching on himself. Hah, hah.

Instead, Ebersole gently poked away at his story structure, his overuse of street vernacular, and his cliché-riddled plot reminiscent of one of those old Warner Bros. movies starring Cagney, Bogart, and Pat O'Brien as either the softhearted warden or the kindhearted priest.

Ricardo appeared to take the criticism well, the suggestion of a grin dancing at a corner of his mouth. "I thought I was doing what you told us the last time, to write what you know," he said.

"You know about a killing like that?"

Holy crap!

The question had just slipped out.

The room suddenly turned into a monastery for monks committed to an oath of silence as all eyes switched from Ebersole to Ricardo, who briefly played into the oath before saying, "Only what I know from the old movies, *jefé*."

When the session ended after two hours and the inmates were lining up single file for the march back to their cells, Ricardo tossed his manuscript, handwritten in a bold, elegant cursive script, the kind they teach in elementary school, into the waste basket.

Ebersole waited for the room to empty and retrieved it.

Two days later, on Thursday, Ebersole had finished packing reference materials for his next session at Central Jail and was half-way to his SUV when the call came from Commander Foley's office, a gum-chewing deputy relieved to have caught him in time to advise that all the programs were cancelled for the duration.

"Had ourselves a murder up on the exercise roof, so we're in lockdown mode," he said. Ebersole pressed for details. "Ugly

screw-up," the deputy said. "A K-10 Red, sexually violent predator fresh in from the state, who should have been in isolation because of his 'keep away' status. Word got out who he was, and that's all she wrote. Somebody waltzed over, sliced his throat, and just as quick disappeared back into the pack. Me, I'd have gone for the K-10's balls first, then his throat."

"Any suspects?"

"We're down to sixty-eight hundred inmates, sir. Central's capacity."

Ebersole returned to his class on Tuesday of the following week. By then the killing had been reduced to a cursory mention on the evening news and two tight paragraphs on a back page of the *Times'* "California" section, more attention than it was getting at Central, where violence was as common as a yawn.

He had struggled at the computer the last five days, failing time and again to better the bones of Ricardo's story. Nothing worked, except for improving the title, from "A Cutthroat Death" to "A Snitch in Time." He'd had better luck keeping the quick brown fox jumping over the lazy dog.

Last night, during another siege of sleepless tossing, he realized why.

He was wrong about the quality of Ricardo's story.

It was no damn good, not worthy of Gus Ebersole's time or effort.

He rolled out of bed, padded across to the den, fixed himself a tall vodka over ice at the bar, and raised his glass to the notion that something better would come along.

It was waiting for him when he strolled into the classroom, a story without a byline, written on fourteen sheets of blue-lined yellow pages from a legal-size pad, hand-printed in precise, microscopic capital letters.

He read the first two pages of "Unnecessary Lives" to himself and didn't dare continue. What followed an electrifying opening sentence turned him breathless, as if he were running the last mile of the L.A. marathon on guts alone.

"Whose is this?" Ebersole said, flashing the pages once he was sure of his voice. "Who wrote this?"

Heads swiveled, eyes questioned eyes, some shrugs, but no one took credit.

Ebersole, satisfied he'd done his due diligence, stashed the manuscript in his attaché case, twirled the combination lock, and launched into a discourse on the top ten clichés of crime fiction writing to be avoided.

Rauschenberg called out "Here, here!" to all but the one item on

the list that decried the use of bizarre names for characters, suggesting, "They couldn't get any more bizarre than what passes for names for real nowadays. If you don't believe me, ask my daughter, Snowflake, when she comes to visit. Her mother's decision, seeing as how she was born during a snowstorm back home in West Virginia and her daddy was a flake."

"Is a flake," Cooke said, his only contribution of the morning.

Smiley Burdette said, "Takes one to know one, Cookie."

Cooke shut his eyes, swallowed a breath, and said, "You'd know that better'n me, old man."

"About a lot of things," Smiley said, his expression emulating his nickname.

"Here's the next cliché," Ebersole said, reasserting himself before Cooke and Burdette could take their feuding to the next level.

George Murdock, a craggy-faced airline pilot in his thirties sitting out a start date on his trial for the murder of his ex-wife and her lover, had been a silent presence during the first two meetings, taking notes but not participating in the discussions. He shook his head when Ebersole decried villains that routinely walk around in unnecessary disguises, like characters in a comic book. Murdock tore a sheaf of the yellow legal-size sheets in half.

That left Ray Lemmon the only inmate with something to read, of itself a surprise. Until now, the sad-eyed inmate with movie star looks, nearing release on a sentence for driving under the influence, had been one of the silent minority, hardly a shadow on the classroom wall.

"It came to me like in a dream after the last meeting," he said, and began reading:

*There's no trick to being dead, once you get the hang of it.
Dead is a lot like living, only different.*

Four pages later, as much as he'd written, everyone wanted more about a murder victim and his guardian angel, a boy with a penchant for stray dogs, who are assigned to commute from Heaven to solve crimes that appear unsolvable.

Smiley was amused. "Obviously the LAPD is their beat, wouldn't you say so, Cookie?"

Cooke half rose from his seat, then thought better of it. He called to Ebersole, "Any way you can get this fudge monkey to shut his flap trap before I do some permanent damage?"

"You hear?" Ricardo said. "Instead of the other way around, the cop needs somebody to protect and serve him."

Catcalls surrounded Cooke and Smiley, championing one or the

other in equal measure and no sense of quieting down despite Ebersole's pleas for order. He pressed the call button to summon the guards and sat patiently while they cleared the room, in truth, anxious to be on his way home to an early start on reading the mystery manuscript. If it ended as well as it started, it would be pouring out of his computer and on its way to *Crime & Punishment Magazine* before nightfall.

The normal nesting time for a story submission at C&P was two or three months, maybe a month for the regular contributors who could be counted on for two or three stories a year, the way Ebersole once had been, before the magazine's editor, Syd Moretti, began inundating him with rejection notes that grew progressively disheartening, from your basic "Not for us this time around" to a heart-sinking, "Where is your talent vacationing, Gus? Did it get there on a one-way ticket?"

He heard from Moretti in less than a week and not in writing, on the phone, Moretti's Midwest roots betrayed by a flat, homespun Iowa twang that embraced a pronounced stammer whenever he got excited, like now.

He said, "Saw your byline and almost didn't bother with a read, Gus, but I did, thank the Lord for giant favors. You are back bigger and better than ever, my friend. 'Unnecessary Lives' is a most necessary buy for us. What else do you have that could be a fit?"

Ebersole thought about it. "I just finished one I call 'A Snitch in Time.'"

"Love it already."

"It's not as complex as 'Unnecessary Lives,' but—"

"No 'buts,' Gus. Upload it to me now." An hour later, Moretti was on the phone again, saying, "You're now officially batting a thousand, my friend. Both contracts will be in the mail first thing in the a.m."

Ebersole celebrated over a vodka and was halfway through a second when he fixated on Ricardo Ramirez. He thought about the sexual predator whose throat was cut and his lingering suspicion that Ricardo was responsible. His hand trembled at the thought of Ricardo's reaction when he discovered "A Snitch in Time" was, word-for-word, his story "A Cutthroat Death." He chugalugged what remained of his drink and pondered his options over swipes straight from the bottle.

The next three sessions at Central went badly, Ebersole losing his train of thought every time he caught Ricardo looking at him with more than casual interest, which was every time he caught

Ricardo staring at him, like Ricardo already knew about *Crime & Punishment* and was already planning how to extract punishment on him for his crime, the theft of Ricardo's story, and—

Smiley Burdette recognized his mind was warped by his imagination and called him on it, hanging back during the pee-and-puff break, saying, "Who are you, kid?"

"Meaning what, Smiley? I don't understand."

"Meaning yourself you ain't been for a while," he said. "Getting worser and worser, and I'm not the only one noticing. I got a shoulder for you to lean on, you feel like spilling your woes to old Uncle Smiley, and if there's anything I can do to help you . . . ?" He plugged the offer with a question mark, took a step away from the desk to give Ebersole thinking room.

Ebersole popped a breath mint and weighed the offer, what was left of his jagged, picked-upon fingernails typing out a nervous tune on the desk's surface.

Despite his age and diminutive size, Smiley was one feisty individual, not intimidated by the bigger, stronger, bullying likes of a Cooke. Confronting Ricardo on his behalf, if it became necessary, was not outside the realm of possibility.

Would it make a difference with Ricardo? It was worth a try, he supposed.

He confessed to Smiley and asked, "You think I might be over-reacting?"

Smiley didn't have to think about it. "No," he said. "Stealing's the misdemeanor here. Taking and selling the story as your own after you filleted his ego by putting the story down, that's a felony where Ramirez comes from." He ran a finger across his throat.

"Maybe I should just quit, get the hell out of here before the issue comes out and—"

"And hide where? He has people on the outside who know how to find people. Street justice ain't pretty, but it is permanent."

"What do I do, Smiley?"

"Cancel out the sale. Get the story back. Give the magazine something else. You have a new Bogey Brothers? I told you how much I like them Bogey Brothers stories."

"That wouldn't work," Ebersole said, leaving it at that. No desire to explain his terminal writer's block. If he could write a Bogey Brothers, anything at all, he wouldn't be in this mess.

Smiley pushed out a noisy sigh, shook his head, and rolled his eyes at the ceiling. "Okay, in here these things have a way of taking care of themselves sometimes, but meantime, I'm on it."

"On it." What's that mean, Smiley?"

The inmates were filing back into the room.

Smiley said, "Ask me that when we meet again on Tuesday." He zipped his lips and retreated to his seat.

Ebersole survived the weekend on volcanic nerves and vodka, most of the time stretched out on the sofa in the den, watching old movies on the wall-mounted TV. Monday was no better, Tuesday morning worse. He cursed a mammoth migraine impervious to poppers and prayer on the bumper-to-bumper rush hour drive to Central he measured in inches.

Anxiety was an even worse enemy by the time he reached the reception desk, where the overweight deputy who regularly escorted him to the classroom, Don, waited with his usual cheery smile and chatterbox gossip.

Don said, "I suppose you already heard how the lockdown was only lifted last night or else you'd still be home right now and I'd be talking to myself."

"First I'm hearing."

"Didn't raise much of a fuss on the news this time around. Another killing in the exercise yard, another throat cut with a toothbrush shiv. Nobody saw anything, of course. Some wise asses suggested we make sure to check everyone with dirty teeth." He laughed. Ebersole didn't. "Commander Foley said to tell you there might be a swell Inspector Phogg story here, seeing as how you knew the victim, him being in your class and fancying himself a writer."

"Who?" Ebersole said, feigning shock while he fought back a grin as his mind conjured an image of Ricardo Ramirez stretched out on the yard's concrete surface, his head resting at an impossible angle on a pillow of his blood. Now he understood what Smiley had meant. He owed him a big payback.

"Nice old bird too. Burdette. Smiley Burdette."

"What? What about Smiley?"

"The vic I was telling you about," Don said. "Him. Smiley Burdette."

They had reached the classroom.

Ebersole pushed a hand against the corridor wall for support and battled to keep his legs from collapsing under him while he imagined what must have happened on the yard.

Playing intermediary, Smiley approached Ricardo and explained about the story sale to C&P. Instead of placating Ricardo, he only made him angrier. In the absence of Ebersole, Ricardo took out his fury on Smiley, the toothbrush his weapon of choice, like before—

Ebersole was now more certain than ever it was Ricardo who murdered the sexual predator.

And who next?

Him. Gus Ebersole would be his next victim, for insulting him in class about his story—then stealing it.

He wanted to run, flee, quit this place, the class, as far away as possible from Ricardo.

Ebersole remembered what Smiley told him about Ricardo having people who know how to find people. *Street justice ain't pretty, but it is permanent*, he'd said.

The deputy pushed open the classroom door for him.

Ebersole made the sign of the cross, then a second time. He took a tentative step inside. Quit. Wheeled around. Said, "I need to speak to the watch commander. Now!"

"You're saying Ricardo Ramirez did it?"

"Murdered Smiley, yes," Ebersole said.

The watch commander moved his tac boots off the desk, sat upright, and studied Ebersole over his coffee mug. "And you know this how?"

Ebersole had an answer ready. "Smiley told me so," he said. "He and Ramirez had been having bad words between them—over what, he didn't say—but he said Ramirez threatened to get him, told him to watch his back."

The commander tweaked his bulbous nose and thick brush mustache and nodded like he was weighing Ebersole's response. After a few moments, he said, "You suppose, instead of his back, Smiley should have been guarding his neck?" He angled his face at Don and winked.

Ebersole bit down hard on his back teeth to suppress his anger. "Commander, you're treating this as a joke? Smiley Burdette is the second inmate killed like that, his throat slashed out on your exercise yard."

"And you're saying Ramirez was also responsible for that death?"

"Draw your own conclusion."

"Tell you what, Mr. Ebersole. I'll pass word up and see what comes down, but I think there's something you should know." He bit off a hunk of the jelly doughnut camped on a pile of blue-jacketed file folders and washed it down with a slug of coffee. Rolled his tongue around his lips. "What happens when we're on inmate overload, a couple hundred receive early release, a 'Get Out of Jail' card. Ramirez was one of the lucky ones sent home the day before Smiley was killed." The watch commander smiled benevolently. He finished the rest of his jelly doughnut and hand-

toweled off his mouth, used a glance to send a message to Don, who caught it immediately.

"Mr. Ebersole, you got a class waiting for you," Don said.

Ebersole wanted to quit the program. There and then. Run and hide. Where? Definitely not home, where Ricardo could be waiting for him. Maybe he'd get into the car and drive—

He put the brakes to his panic.

Supposing Smiley never had a chance to talk to Ricardo?

That being the case, Ricardo wouldn't know to come after him until the story appeared in print. If Smiley did talk to Ricardo, there still was time to eliminate the problem with a call to the magazine.

Ebersole berated himself for overreacting, for overlooking the obvious.

He said, "Lead the way, Don."

The inmates quit the quiet chatter among themselves when Ebersole walked through the door. He settled at the desk, faked a smile apologizing for his tardiness, and said, "Anyone have something new to share?"

Cooke said, "Call on Smiley Burdette, why don't you? Oh, wait, the old pain in the ass has quit the class permanently." His laughter drowned out a round of hisses and boos.

Rauschenberg stood. "Maybe next time," he said and sat back down.

George Murdock looked up from the legal-size yellow pad he'd been studying and raised his hand for attention. He cleared his throat. Screwed self-doubt onto his face. Dismissed the idea of reading with a gesture.

Ray Lemmon had another four pages in the story he'd been working on about the dead detective. The inmates applauded him after he finished and Ebersole gave him an encouraging critique.

Absent volunteers from among the slackers, Ebersole read them a locked-room mystery from one of the old issues of C&P he carried in his attaché case and talked briefly about story structure before signaling the guard that class was ending early today.

Ebersole reached his home off Ventura Boulevard, behind CBS Studio Center in the flats of Studio City, within the hour. His worries about Ricardo Ramirez had resumed and consumed him throughout the drive, eviscerating his earlier common sense conclusions, building a fear that compelled him to circle the shady tree-lined block twice in search of strangers hunkered down in unfamiliar cars. He exercised similar caution entering the house

and exploring the rooms before he felt safe, secure, and comfortable enough to pour himself a double vodka and dial Syd Moretti at C&P.

His solution to the problem with Ricardo was simplicity itself.

He would tell Syd he had to renege on the contract for "A Snitch in Time," having only now remembered that the story was sold earlier in the year to C&P's major competitor, *Killer Thrills & Chills*, by his ex-agent. He'd stress the *ex*. Apologize profusely. Assure Syd there was no problem with "Unnecessary Lives." He'd have to endure some serious flak, but it beat anything Ricardo would have in store for him.

"I was just thinking to call you," Syd said, hopping on the line. "Got good news, buddy. Great news: You sitting down?" Before Ebersole could answer, Syd said, "I somehow came up a story light for the next issue. 'A Snitch in Time' was a perfect fit. We're on the presses now, and as a bonus, your name's plastered on the cover . . . Gus, you there? You hear me? You sharing the excitement, Gus?"

"Sharing, Syd," Ebersole said, trying to sound excited, trying to remember where he had stored the .38 Special he learned to use while doing research at the Police Academy for an early Inspector Phogg story. He found it in the W-X-Y-Z drawer of the metal file cabinet in the guest bedroom he'd turned into his office after buying the house six years ago. The .38 needed a lube job. Bullets too. By evening he had it in prime working condition, in easy reach on the nightstand when he stumbled into bed.

Three weeks later, the program quit Ebersole before he could quit the program.

He was relieved to get Commander Foley's call, the commander using "attrition" as the cause, with no mention of the times Ebersole had shown up nursing a hangover and launching disjointed lectures that may have made sense to him, but to no one else.

The class was down to the sleepy silent minority and, if one were to believe Foley, the current jail population lacked anyone anxious to fill the desk seats vacated by Cooke, Murdock, Rauschenberg, Lemmon and, of course, Smiley Burdette and Ricardo Ramirez.

Cooke had waltzed out on bail after his appeal hearing was granted. Murdock's lawyers had successfully argued for a change of venue, and their client was now resident at the Presley Detention Center in Riverside. Rauschenberg had completed his sentence. Lemmon was among the latest beneficiaries of early release.

And Ebersole was getting no writing done.

None.

Not for lack of trying.

Every story idea petered out after a page or two, every creative thought supplanted by the quick brown fox, every noise or vodka-burnished notion reminding him the mail would bring the new issue of C&P any day now, and a visit from Ricardo Ramirez in its wake.

Instead, Ricardo showed up a week before the magazine arrived, in his mug shot on the six o'clock news, tied to a report about an attempted armed robbery turned deadly at a 7-Eleven in Koreatown.

The clerk had been quicker with the double-barrel shotgun under counter than Ricardo was with his Saturday Night Special, a Raven Arms MP-25 semiautomatic handgun.

R.I.P. Ricardo.

Ebersole toasted the screen with his vodka and, loaded down with renewed energy and enthusiasm, stumbled to the computer. The quick brown fox quickly overpowered his euphoria, but he slept through the night for the first time in months.

The noises that awakened Ebersole two nights after C&P hit the newsstands sounded like breaking glass at the rear of the house, followed by the squeak of rusty door hinges, then footsteps cautiously advancing along the hardwood floor leading to his bedroom.

His adrenaline kicked in. His heart took off like a jazz drum solo. His breathing matched the beat. Recently there had been a series of home invasions in the neighborhood. One, a block over, had resulted in the deaths of an elderly couple. Was he about to become the latest victim? He didn't dare move as one thought after another charged through his mind, squeezing his eyes tighter when he felt the subtle heat of the flashlight beam stroking up and down his face.

The .38 Special was in the nightstand drawer.

Should he risk it?

He didn't have time to think it through before a muffled, vaguely familiar voice prompted him, "Time to rise and shine, Gus."

Gus. The intruder knew his name. This was no random home invasion.

Ebersole pushed up into a sitting position. He clamped a hand

over his eyes to block the flashlight's dazzle. "Please take what you want and leave," he said, answering a question he had nursed for years: How would he react if he ever found himself in this situation?

The intruder made a dismissive noise. "You write better dialogue in your stories, Gus."

"You read my stories?"

"How Mrs. Marlowe was always saying, 'You naughty boy, you. I could be your dear mother.' That was a real hoot every damn time."

"Your mama's dead and gone to hell, where she belongs, along with that damn maggot passing himself off as your papa."

"I can't recall writing that," Ebersole said. "Mrs. Marlowe would never speak that way."

"Not her, Mrs. Marlowe. It's in the story that just came out, 'A Snitch in Time.' Maybe you can't remember because you didn't write the story, although it has your name as the author."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Like you don't know without me explaining it to you?"

The overhead light clicked on, momentarily blinding Ebersole.

The intruder was hiding his identity inside a black woolen ski mask and a heavy olive-colored overcoat a size too small that quit at his ankles. The coat was open, exposing a poorly fitting uniform of some sort.

"That's my story, I wrote it," he said. "I named it 'A Cutthroat Death,' but nothing else was different about it except your name. Your damn name on *my* story."

"Who are you?"

"Who do you think I am? I'm my own avenging angel." He dropped the flashlight into a coat pocket, reached inside the coat, and came out with a foot-long knife.

"Maybe you remember this from the story, Gus? The black Glock Survival Knife with the six and a half inch blade sharp enough to split nose hairs in half. A utility saw on the back of the blade? My weapon of choice, but not available while I was at Central, forcing me to be inventive with toothbrushes."

"You killed Smiley Burdette?"

"Yes. And the other one, the damn predator. Perverts like him have no business walking this earth instead of feeding earth worms six feet under."

"But why Smiley?"

"He told me he was going to snitch to you about the favor Ricardo did for me by passing off the story as his own. It was nobody's business why I wanted it to be a secret, but after you tore into it like a rabid dog, I knew I had been right. Ricardo didn't mind though. He said forget it, it was only a flea bite. And I did—

until I saw it in *Crime & Punishment Magazine*. Your name. You lied about my story to the class so you could steal it for yourself, making you a different kind of predator.”

Holding the knife out like a bayonet, he moved in on Ebersole.

The blade cut into the pillow seconds after Ebersole reflexively rolled sideways.

He scrambled to his feet on the side of the bed opposite the intruder and pulled open the nightstand drawer. The .38 wasn't there. He cursed himself for forgetting he'd moved it back to the W-X-Y-Z file drawer the morning after celebrating the news of Ricardo's murder.

The intruder had come around the bed and was advancing on him.

Ebersole rolled across the bed, dashed out of the bedroom and down the dark hallway, the intruder in noisy pursuit. He slammed the office door shut, turned the bolt lock, and scrambled to the file cabinet, dropped to his knees, and went after the .38. The intruder was rattling the knob, pounding and kicking on the door. Ebersole padded across the room and took a shooter's stance, arms extended and two hands on the weapon. He squeezed the trigger, again, then another time, then twice more. The bullets crashed through the door, at first causing undecipherable outbursts from outside in the hallway, then nothing at all.

Ebersole, raining sweat, held his position for another minute and played catch-up with his breath. He half expected the intruder to come crashing through the door, blood spilling from his wounds, attempting another murderous charge. How many times had he written that scene in one of his short stories? How many times had he watched it played out that way in the movies and on TV? He eased his grip on the .38, but kept his finger on the trigger while unlocking and opening the door a creaking inch at a time.

The intruder was a motionless pile of bloody, bullet-riddled dead meat a few feet away, still clinging tightly to the knife. Ebersole approached the body cautiously. Satisfied, he settled on his haunches and sucked in a year's supply of oxygen before lifting the intruder's ski mask to see who owned the eyes staring blindly at him.

They belonged to George Murdock, who apparently had no problem murdering his ex and her lover, but never could bring himself to share any of the writing he brought to class. A shame, Ebersole thought now. There could have been something equal to "A Cutthroat Death" and equally worth acquiring as his own.

Two days later, Ebersole met Al Cooke for coffee at the

Starbucks on Ventura, up from Laurel Canyon, a nest for writers diligently slaving over laptops on their Great American Novels and million-dollar screenplays.

"It wasn't hard tracking you down after I read in the news about that murderous creep Murdock and how you took him out," Cooke said, pumping his hand with the type of enthusiasm usually reserved for presidents and pontiffs. "An old buddy downtown was happy to do a favor for a fellow defender of the Blue Wall, if you know what I mean?"

"How is your appeal going?"

"The wheels of justice are slowly grinding to a halt. Don't be surprised when you learn the D.A.'s dropped all the charges against me and I'm back protecting and serving." He took a lick of the whipped cream on his white chocolate mocha and made a yummy face. "I'm getting out from under on the legit, where Murdock had to maneuver an escape, overpowering that guard at Presley Detention, stealing his uniform, the rest of it before he came after you like he did. Did he say why before you managed to clock him for keeps, lucky bastard that you are?"

"Murdock accused me of stealing a story from him."

"How brain dead can a person be? He never opened his mouth once in all the weeks of the program. Any truth to it, though, I could see where he might be pissed off. Happened to me, I would be tempted to do the same thing to the bastard, only I'm smarter than Murdock. Crime is easy; anyone can do it. But not everyone knows how to keep from getting caught. That's an art."

Ebersole fought to hide his discomfort. "You said you were working on a book—"

"*Cop-Out*. It's still in the works."

"But you never took it past that in class or presented a story."

Cooke smiled. "Why I phoned you. What I wanted to talk about." He worked the white chocolate mocha and spent several seconds with his eyes trained on a leggy brunette in short shorts and an overflowing halter top studying the counter menu. "I was the cop in the ointment, getting no respect, you remember? That old bigmouth Burdette with his nasty cracks, par for the course, so why run anything I wrote up the flagpole? Instead, I planted a chapter of *Cop-Out* on your desk anonymously, the one I titled 'Unnecessary Lives.' I figured you'd read and critique it, so I'd get some quality input. Instead, you stashed it in your case, never to be seen or heard about in class. So tell me, did you read it? What did you think? I'm dying to hear."

Ebersole spilled his coffee. ☛

MYSTERY CLASSIC

R. AUSTIN FREEMAN

THE BLUE SEQUIN

Thorndyke stood looking up and down the platform with anxiety that increased as the time drew near for the departure of the train.

"This is very unfortunate," he said, reluctantly stepping into an empty smoking compartment as the guard executed a flourish with his green flag. "I am afraid we have missed our friend." He closed the door, and, as the train began to move, thrust his head out of the window.

"Now I wonder if that will be he," he continued. "If so, he has caught the train by the skin of his teeth, and is now in one of the rear compartments."

The subject of Thorndyke's speculations was Mr. Edward Stopford, of the firm of Stopford and Myers, of Portugal Street, solicitors; and his connection with us at present arose out of a telegram that had reached our chambers on the preceding evening. It was reply-paid, and ran thus:

"Can you come here tomorrow to direct defence? Important case. All costs undertaken by us.—STOPFORD AND MYERS."

Thorndyke's reply had been in the affirmative, and early on this present morning a further telegram—evidently posted overnight—had been delivered:

"Shall leave for Woldhurst by 8.25 from Charing Cross. Will call for you if possible.—EDWARD STOPFORD."

He had not called, however, and since he was unknown personally to us both, we could not judge whether or not he had been among the passengers on the platform.

"It is most unfortunate," Thorndyke repeated, "for it deprives us of that preliminary consideration of the case which is so invaluable." He filled his pipe thoughtfully, and, having made a fruitless inspection of the platform at London Bridge, took up the paper

From John Thorndyke's Cases, 1909.

that he had bought at the bookstall and began to turn over the leaves, running his eye quickly down the columns, unmindful of the journalistic baits in paragraph or article.

"It is a great disadvantage," he observed, while still glancing through the paper, "to come plump into an inquiry without preparation—to be confronted with the details before one has a chance of considering the case in general terms. For instance—"

He paused, leaving the sentence unfinished, and as I looked up inquiringly I saw that he had turned over another page, and was now reading attentively.

"This looks like our case, Jervis," he said presently, handing me the paper and indicating a paragraph at the top of the page. It was quite brief, and was headed "Terrible Murder in Kent," the account being as follows:

"A shocking crime was discovered yesterday morning at the little town of Woldhurst, which lies on the branch line from Halbury Junction. The discovery was made by a porter who was inspecting the carriages of the train which had just come in. On opening the door of a first-class compartment, he was horrified to find the body of a fashionably dressed woman stretched upon the floor. Medical aid was immediately summoned, and on the arrival of the divisional surgeon, Dr. Morton, it was ascertained that the woman had not been dead more than a few minutes.

"The state of the corpse leaves no doubt that a murder of a most brutal kind has been perpetrated, the cause of death being a penetrating wound of the head, inflicted with some pointed implement, which must have been used with terrible violence, since it has perforated the skull and entered the brain. That robbery was not the motive of the crime is made clear by the fact that an expensively fitted dressing-bag was found on the rack, and that the dead woman's jewellery, including several valuable diamond rings, was untouched. It is rumoured that an arrest has been made by the local police."

"A gruesome affair," I remarked, as I handed back the paper, "but the report does not give us much information."

"It does not," Thorndyke agreed, "and yet it gives us something to consider. Here is a perforating wound of the skull, inflicted with some pointed implement—that is, assuming that it is not a bullet wound. Now, what kind of implement would be capable of inflicting such an injury? How would such an implement be used in the confined space of a railway-carriage, and what sort of person would be in possession of such an implement? These are preliminary questions that are worth considering, and I commend them to you, together with the further problems of the possible

motive—excluding robbery—and any circumstances other than murder which might account for the injury.”

“The choice of suitable implements is not very great,” I observed.

“It is very limited, and most of them, such as a plasterer’s pick or a geological hammer, are associated with certain definite occupations. You have a notebook?”

I had, and accepting the hint, I produced it and pursued my further reflections in silence, while my companion, with his notebook also on his knee, gazed steadily out of the window. And thus he remained, wrapped in thought, jotting down an entry now and again in his book, until the train slowed down at Halbury Junction, where we had to change onto a branch line.

As we stepped out, I noticed a well-dressed man hurrying up the platform from the rear and eagerly scanning the faces of the few passengers who had alighted. Soon he espied us, and, approaching quickly, asked, as he looked from one of us to the other:

“Dr. Thorndyke?”

“Yes,” replied my colleague, adding: “And you, I presume, are Mr. Edward Stopford?”

The solicitor bowed. “This is a dreadful affair,” he said, in an agitated manner. “I see you have the paper. A most shocking affair. I am immensely relieved to find you here. Nearly missed the train, and feared I should miss you.”

“There appears to have been an arrest,” Thorndyke began.

“Yes—my brother. Terrible business. Let us walk up the platform; our train won’t start for a quarter of an hour yet.”

We deposited our joint Gladstone and Thorndyke’s travelling-case in an empty first-class compartment and then, with the solicitor between us, strolled up to the unfrequented end of the platform.

“My brother’s position,” said Mr. Stopford, “fills me with dismay—but let me give you the facts in order, and you shall judge for yourself. This poor creature who has been murdered so brutally was a Miss Edith Grant. She was formerly an artist’s model, and as such was a good deal employed by my brother, who is a painter—Harold Stopford, you know, A.R.A. now—”

“I know his work very well, and charming work it is.”

“I think so, too. Well, in those days he was quite a youngster—about twenty—and he became very intimate with Miss Grant, in quite an innocent way, though not very discreet; but she was a nice respectable girl, as most English models are, and no one thought any harm. However, a good many letters passed between them, and some little presents, amongst which was a beaded chain

carrying a locket, and in this he was fool enough to put his portrait and the inscription, 'Edith, from Harold.'

"Later on Miss Grant, who had a rather good voice, went on the stage, in the comic opera line, and in consequence, her habits and associates changed somewhat; and as Harold had meanwhile become engaged, he was naturally anxious to get his letters back, and especially to exchange the locket for some less compromising gift. The letters she eventually sent him, but refused absolutely to part with the locket.

"Now, for the last month Harold has been staying at Halbury, making sketching excursions into the surrounding country, and yesterday morning he took the train to Shinglehurst, the third station from here, and the one before Woldhurst.

"On the platform here he met Miss Grant, who had come down from London, and was going on to Worthing. They entered the branch train together, having a first-class compartment to themselves. It seems she was wearing his locket at the time, and he made another appeal to her to make an exchange, which she refused, as before. The discussion appears to have become rather heated and angry on both sides, for the guard and a porter at Munsden both noticed that they seemed to be quarrelling; but the upshot of the affair was that the lady snapped the chain, and tossed it together with the locket to my brother, and they parted quite amiably at Shinglehurst, where Harold got out. He was then carrying his full sketching kit, including a large holland umbrella, the lower joint of which is an ash staff fitted with a powerful steel spike for driving into the ground.

"It was about half-past ten when he got out at Shinglehurst; by eleven he had reached his pitch and got to work, and he painted steadily for three hours. Then he packed up his traps and was just starting on his way back to the station, when he was met by the police and arrested.

"And now, observe the accumulation of circumstantial evidence against him. He was the last person seen in company with the murdered woman—for no one seems to have seen her after they left Munsden; he appeared to be quarrelling with her when she was last seen alive; he had a reason for possibly wishing for her death; he was provided with an implement—a spiked staff—capable of inflicting the injury which caused her death; and when he was searched, there was found in his possession the locket and broken chain, apparently removed from her person with violence.

"Against all this is, of course, his known character—he is the gentlest and most amiable of men—and his subsequent conduct—imbecile to the last degree if he had been guilty; but as a lawyer, I

can't help seeing that appearances are almost hopelessly against him."

"We won't say 'hopelessly,'" replied Thorndyke, as we took our places in the carriage, "though I expect the police are pretty cocksure. When does the inquest open?"

"Today at four. I have obtained an order from the coroner for you to examine the body and be present at the post-mortem."

"Do you happen to know the exact position of the wound?"

"Yes; it is a little above and behind the left ear—a horrible round hole, with a ragged cut or tear running from it to the side of the forehead."

"And how was the body lying?"

"Right along the floor, with the feet close to the off-side door."

"Was the wound on the head the only one?"

"No; there was a long cut or bruise on the right cheek—a contused wound the police surgeon called it, which he believes to have been inflicted with a heavy and rather blunt weapon. I have not heard of any other wounds or bruises."

"Did anyone enter the train yesterday at Shinglehurst?" Thorndyke asked.

"No one entered the train after it left Halbury."

Thorndyke considered these statements in silence, and presently fell into a brown study, from which he roused only as the train moved out of Shinglehurst station.

"It would be about here that the murder was committed," said Mr. Stopford, "at least, between here and Woldhurst."

Thorndyke nodded rather abstractedly, being engaged at the moment in observing with great attention the objects that were visible from the windows.

"I notice," he remarked presently, "a number of chips scattered about between the rails, and some of the chair-wedges look new. Have there been any platelayers at work lately?"

"Yes," answered Stopford, "they are on the line now, I believe—at least, I saw a gang working near Woldhurst yesterday, and they are said to have set a rick on fire; I saw it smoking when I came down."

"Indeed; and this middle line of rails is, I suppose, a sort of siding?"

"Yes; they shunt the goods trains and empty trucks onto it. There are the remains of the rick—still smouldering, you see."

Thorndyke gazed absently at the blackened heap until an empty cattle-truck on the middle track hid it from view. This was succeeded by a line of goods-waggons, and these by a passenger coach, one compartment of which—a first-class—was closed up and sealed. The train now began to slow down rather suddenly,

and a couple of minutes later we brought up in Woldhurst station.

It was evident that rumours of Thorndyke's advent had preceded us, for the entire staff—two porters, an inspector, and the station-master—were waiting expectantly on the platform, and the latter came forward, regardless of his dignity, to help us with our luggage.

"Do you think I could see the carriage?" Thorndyke asked the solicitor.

"Not the inside, sir," said the station-master, on being appealed to. "The police have sealed it up. You would have to ask the inspector."

"Well, I can have a look at the outside, I suppose?" said Thorndyke, and to this the station-master readily agreed, and offered to accompany us.

"What other first-class passengers were there?" Thorndyke asked.

"None, sir. There was only one first-class coach, and the deceased was the only person in it. It has given us all a dreadful turn, this affair has," he continued, as we set off up the line. "I was on the platform when the train came in. We were watching a rick that was burning up the line, and a rare blaze it made, too; and I was just saying that we should have to move the cattle-truck that was on the mid-track, because, you see, sir, the smoke and sparks were blowing across, and I thought it would frighten the poor beasts. And Mr. Felton he don't like his beasts handled roughly. He says it spoils the meat."

"No doubt he is right," said Thorndyke. "But now, tell me, do you think it is possible for any person to board or leave the train on the off-side unobserved? Could a man, for instance, enter a compartment on the off-side at one station and drop off as the train was slowing down at the next, without being seen?"

"I doubt it," replied the station-master. "Still, I wouldn't say it is impossible."

"Thank you. Oh, and there's another question. You have a gang of men at work on the line, I see. Now, do those men belong to the district?"

"No, sir; they are strangers, every one, and pretty rough diamonds some of 'em are. But I shouldn't say there was any real harm in 'em. If you was suspecting any of 'em of being mixed up in this—"

"I am not," interrupted Thorndyke rather shortly. "I suspect nobody; but I wish to get all the facts of the case at the outset."

"Naturally, sir," replied the abashed official; and we pursued our way in silence.

"Do you remember, by the way," said Thorndyke, as we

approached the empty coach, "whether the off-side door of the compartment was closed and locked when the body was discovered?"

"It was closed, sir, but not locked. Why, sir, did you think—?"

"Nothing, nothing. The sealed compartment is the one, of course?"

Without waiting for a reply, he commenced his survey of the coach, while I gently restrained our two companions from shadowing him, as they were disposed to do. The off-side footboard occupied his attention specially, and when he had scrutinized minutely the part opposite the fatal compartment, he walked slowly from end to end with his eyes but a few inches from its surface, as though he was searching for something.

Near what had been the rear end he stopped and drew from his pocket a piece of paper; then, with a moistened finger-tip, he picked up from the footboard some evidently minute object, which he carefully transferred to the paper, folding the latter and placing it in his pocket-book.

He next mounted the footboard, and, having peered in through the window of the sealed compartment, produced from his pocket a small insufflator or powder-blower, with which he blew a stream of impalpable smoke-like powder on to the edges of the middle window, bestowing the closest attention on the irregular dusty patches in which it settled, and even measuring one on the jamb of the window with a pocket-rule. At length he stepped down, and, having carefully looked over the near-side footboard, announced that he had finished for the present.

As we were returning down the line, we passed a working man, who seemed to be viewing the chairs and sleepers with more than casual interest.

"That, I suppose, is one of the plate-layers?" Thorndyke suggested to the station-master.

"Yes, the foreman of the gang," was the reply.

"I'll just step back and have a word with him, if you will walk on slowly." And my colleague turned back briskly and overtook the man, with whom he remained in conversation for some minutes.

"I think I see the police inspector on the platform," remarked Thorndyke, as we approached the station.

"Yes, there he is," said our guide. "Come down to see what you are after, sir, I expect." Which was doubtless the case, although the officer professed to be there by the merest chance.

"You would like to see the weapon, sir, I suppose?" he remarked, when he had introduced himself.

"The umbrella-spike," Thorndyke corrected. "Yes, if I may. We

are going to the mortuary now."

"Then you'll pass the station on the way; so, if you care to look in, I will walk up with you."

This proposition being agreed to, we all proceeded to the police station, including the station-master, who was on the very tiptoe of curiosity.

"There you are, sir," said the inspector, unlocking his office, and ushering us in. "Don't say we haven't given every facility to the defence. There are all the effects of the accused, including the very weapon the deed was done with."

"Come, come," protested Thorndyke; "we mustn't be premature." He took the stout ash staff from the officer, and, having examined the formidable spike through a lens, drew from his pocket a steel calliper-gauge, with which he carefully measured the diameter of the spike, and the staff to which it was fixed. "And now," he said, when he had made a note of the measurements in his book, "we will look at the colour-box and the sketch. Ha! A very orderly man, your brother, Mr. Stopford. Tubes all in their places, palette-knives wiped clean, palette cleaned off and rubbed bright, brushes wiped—they ought to be washed before they stiffen—all this is very significant." He unstrapped the sketch from the blank canvas to which it was pinned, and, standing it on a chair in a good light, stepped back to look at it.

"And you tell me that that is only three hours' work!" he exclaimed, looking at the lawyer. "It is really a marvellous achievement."

"My brother is a very rapid worker," replied Stopford dejectedly.

"Yes, but this is not only amazingly rapid; it is in his very happiest vein—full of spirit and feeling. But we mustn't stay to look at it longer." He replaced the canvas on its pins, and having glanced at the locket and some other articles that lay in a drawer, thanked the inspector for his courtesy and withdrew.

"That sketch and the colour-box appear very suggestive to me," he remarked, as we walked up the street.

"To me also," said Stopford gloomily, "for they are under lock and key, like their owner, poor old fellow."

He sighed heavily, and we walked on in silence.

The mortuary-keeper had evidently heard of our arrival, for he was waiting at the door with the key in his hand, and, on being shown the coroner's order, unlocked the door, and we entered together; but, after a momentary glance at the ghostly, shrouded figure lying upon the slate table, Stopford turned pale and retreated, saying that he would wait for us outside with the mortuary-keeper.

As soon as the door was closed and locked on the inside, Thorndyke glanced curiously round the bare, whitewashed building. A stream of sunlight poured in through the skylight, and fell upon the silent form that lay so still under its covering-sheet, and one stray beam glanced into a corner by the door, where, on a row of pegs and a deal table, the dead woman's clothing was displayed.

"There is something unspeakably sad in these poor relics, Jervis," said Thorndyke, as we stood before them. "To me they are more tragic, more full of pathetic suggestion, than the corpse itself. See the smart, jaunty hat, and the costly skirts hanging there, so desolate and forlorn; the dainty lingerie on the table, neatly folded—by the mortuary-man's wife, I hope—the little French shoes and open-work silk stockings. How pathetically eloquent they are of harmless, womanly vanity, and the gay, careless life, snapped short in the twinkling of an eye. But we must not give way to sentiment. There is another life threatened, and it is in our keeping."

He lifted the hat from its peg, and turned it over in his hand. It was, I think, what is called a "picture-hat"—a huge, flat, shapeless mass of gauze and ribbon and feather, spangled over freely with dark-blue sequins. In one part of the brim was a ragged hole, and from this the glittering sequins dropped off in little showers when the hat was moved.

"This will have been worn tilted over on the left side," said Thorndyke, "judging by the general shape and the position of the hole."

"Yes," I agreed. "Like that of the Duchess of Devonshire in Gainsborough's portrait."

"Exactly."

He shook a few of the sequins into the palm of his hand, and, replacing the hat on its peg, dropped the little discs into an envelope, on which he wrote, "From the hat," and slipped it into his pocket. Then stepping over to the table, he drew back the sheet reverently and even tenderly from the dead woman's face, and looked down at it with grave pity. It was a comely face, white as marble, serene and peaceful in expression, with half-closed eyes, and framed with a mass of brassy, yellow hair; but its beauty was marred by a long linear wound, half cut, half bruise, running down the right cheek from the eye to the chin.

"A handsome girl," Thorndyke commented, "a dark-haired blonde. What a sin to have disfigured herself so with that horrible peroxide." He smoothed the hair back from her forehead, and added: "She seems to have applied the stuff last about ten days

ago. There is about a quarter of an inch of dark hair at the roots. What do you make of that wound on the cheek?"

"It looks as if she had struck some sharp angle in falling, though, as the seats are padded in first-class carriages, I don't see what she could have struck."

"No. And now let us look at the other wound. Will you note down the description?" He handed me his notebook, and I wrote down as he dictated: "A clean-punched circular hole in skull, an inch behind and above margin of left ear—diameter, an inch and seven-sixteenths; starred fracture of parietal bone; membranes perforated, and brain entered deeply; ragged scalp-wound, extending forward to margin of left orbit; fragments of gauze and sequins in edges of wound. That will do for the present. Dr. Morton will give us further details if we want them."

He pocketed his callipers and rule, drew from the bruised scalp one or two loose hairs, which he placed in the envelope with the sequins, and, having looked over the body for other wounds or bruises (of which there were none), replaced the sheet, and prepared to depart.

As we walked away from the mortuary, Thorndyke was silent and deeply thoughtful, and I gathered that he was piecing together the facts that he had acquired. At length Mr. Stopford, who had several times looked at him curiously, said:

"The post-mortem will take place at three, and it is now only half-past eleven. What would you like to do next?"

Thorndyke, who, in spite of his mental preoccupation, had been looking about him in his usual keen, attentive way, halted suddenly.

"Your reference to the post-mortem," said he, "reminds me that I forgot to put the ox-gall into my case."

"Ox-gall!" I exclaimed, endeavouring vainly to connect this substance with the technique of the pathologist. "What were you going to do with—"

But here I broke off, remembering my friend's dislike of any discussion of his methods before strangers.

"I suppose," he continued, "there would hardly be an artist's colourman in a place of this size?"

"I should think not," said Stopford. "But couldn't you get the stuff from a butcher? There's a shop just across the road."

"So there is," agreed Thorndyke, who had already observed the shop. "The gall ought, of course, to be prepared, but we can filter it ourselves—that is, if the butcher has any. We will try him, at any rate."

He crossed the road towards the shop, over which the name

"Felton" appeared in gilt lettering, and, addressing himself to the proprietor, who stood at the door, introduced himself and explained his wants.

"Ox-gall?" said the butcher. "No, sir, I haven't any just now; but I am having a beast killed this afternoon, and I can let you have some then. In fact," he added, after a pause, "as the matter is of importance, I can have one killed at once if you wish it."

"That is very kind of you," said Thorndyke, "and it would greatly oblige me. Is the beast perfectly healthy?"

"They're in splendid condition, sir. I picked them out of the herd myself. But you shall see them—ay, and choose the one that you'd like killed."

"You are really very good," said Thorndyke warmly. "I will just run into the chemist's next door, and get a suitable bottle, and then I will avail myself of your exceedingly kind offer."

He hurried into the chemist's shop, from which he presently emerged, carrying a white paper parcel; and we then followed the butcher down a narrow lane by the side of his shop. It led to an enclosure containing a small pen, in which were confined three handsome steers, whose glossy, black coats contrasted in a very striking manner with their long, greyish-white, nearly straight horns.

"These are certainly very fine beasts, Mr. Felton," said Thorndyke, as we drew up beside the pen, "and in excellent condition, too."

He leaned over the pen and examined the beasts critically, especially as to their eyes and horns; then, approaching the nearest one, he raised his stick and bestowed a smart tap on the under-side of the right horn, following it by a similar tap on the left one, a proceeding that the beast viewed with stolid surprise.

"The state of the horns," explained Thorndyke, as he moved on to the next steer, "enables one to judge, to some extent, of the beast's health."

"Lord bless you, sir," laughed Mr. Felton, "they haven't got no feeling in their horns, else what good 'ud their horns be to 'em?"

Apparently he was right, for the second steer was as indifferent to a sounding rap on either horn as the first. Nevertheless, when Thorndyke approached the third steer, I unconsciously drew nearer to watch; and I noticed that, as the stick struck the horn, the beast drew back in evident alarm, and that when the blow was repeated, it became manifestly uneasy.

"He don't seem to like that," said the butcher. "Seems as if—Hullo, that's queer!"

Thorndyke had just brought his stick up against the left horn,

and immediately the beast had winced and started back, shaking his head and moaning. There was not, however, room for him to back out of reach, and Thorndyke, by leaning into the pen, was able to inspect the sensitive horn, which he did with the closest attention, while the butcher looked on with obvious perturbation.

"You don't think there's anything wrong with this beast, sir, I hope," said he.

"I can't say without a further examination," replied Thorndyke. "It may be the horn only that is affected. If you will have it sawn off close to the head, and sent up to me at the hotel, I will look at it and tell you. And, by way of preventing any mistakes, I will mark it and cover it up, to protect it from injury in the slaughter-house."

He opened his parcel and produced from it a wide-mouthed bottle labelled "Ox-gall," a sheet of gutta-percha tissue, a roller bandage, and a stick of sealing-wax. Handing the bottle to Mr. Felton, he encased the distal half of the horn in a covering by means of the tissue and the bandage, which he fixed securely with the sealing-wax.

"I'll saw the horn off and bring it up to the hotel myself, with the ox-gall," said Mr. Felton. "You shall have them in half an hour."

He was as good as his word, for in half an hour Thorndyke was seated at a small table by the window of our private sitting-room in the Black Bull Hotel. The table was covered with newspaper, and on it lay the long grey horn and Thorndyke's travelling-case, now open and displaying a small microscope and its accessories. The butcher was seated solidly in an armchair waiting, with a half-suspicious eye on Thorndyke for the report; and I was endeavouring by cheerful talk to keep Mr. Stopford from sinking into utter despondency, though I, too, kept a furtive watch on my colleague's rather mysterious proceedings.

I saw him unwind the bandage and apply the horn to his ear, bending it slightly to and fro. I watched him, as he scanned the surface closely through a lens, and observed him as he scraped some substance from the pointed end on to a glass slide, and, having applied a drop of some reagent, began to tease out the scraping with a pair of mounted needles. Presently he placed the slide under the microscope, and, having observed it attentively for a minute or two, turned round sharply.

"Come and look at this, Jervis," said he.

I wanted no second bidding, being on tenterhooks of curiosity, but came over and applied my eye to the instrument.

"Well, what is it?" he asked.

"A multipolar nerve corpuscle—very shrivelled, but unmistakable."

"And this?"

He moved the slide to a fresh spot.

"Two pyramidal nerve corpuscles and some portions of fibres."

"And what do you say the tissue is?"

"Cortical brain substance, I should say, without a doubt."

"I entirely agree with you. And that being so," he added, turning to Mr. Stopford, "we may say that the case for the defence is practically complete."

"What, in Heaven's name, do you mean?" exclaimed Stopford, starting up.

"I mean that we can now prove when and where and how Miss Grant met her death. Come and sit down here, and I will explain. No, you needn't go away, Mr. Felton. We shall have to subpoena you. Perhaps," he continued, "we had better go over the facts and see what they suggest. And first we note the position of the body, lying with the feet close to the off-side door, showing that, when she fell, the deceased was sitting, or more probably standing, close to that door. Next there is this." He drew from his pocket a folded paper, which he opened, displaying a tiny blue disc. "It is one of the sequins with which her hat was trimmed, and I have in this envelope several more which I took from the hat itself."

"This single sequin I picked up on the rear end of the off-side footboard, and its presence there makes it nearly certain that at some time Miss Grant had put her head out of the window on that side."

"The next item of evidence I obtained by dusting the margins of the off-side window with a light powder, which made visible a greasy impression three and a quarter inches long on the sharp corner of the right-hand jamb (right-hand from the inside, I mean)."

"And now as to the evidence furnished by the body. The wound in the skull is behind and above the left ear, is roughly circular, and measures one inch and seven-sixteenths at most, and a ragged scalp-wound runs from it towards the left eye. On the right cheek is a linear contused wound three and a quarter inches long. There are no other injuries."

"Our next facts are furnished by this." He took up the horn and tapped it with his finger, while the solicitor and Mr. Felton stared at him in speechless wonder. "You notice it is a left horn, and you remember that it was highly sensitive. If you put your ear to it while I strain it, you will hear the grating of a fracture in the bony core. Now look at the pointed end, and you will see several deep scratches running lengthwise, and where those scratches end the diameter of the horn is, as you see by this calliper-gauge, one inch

and seven-sixteenths. Covering the scratches is a dry blood-stain, and at the extreme tip is a small mass of a dried substance which Dr. Jervis and I have examined with the microscope and are satisfied is brain tissue."

"Good God!" exclaimed Stopford eagerly. "Do you mean to say—"

"Let us finish with the facts, Mr. Stopford," Thorndyke interrupted. "Now, if you look closely at that blood-stain, you will see a short piece of hair stuck to the horn, and through this lens you can make out the root-bulb. It is a golden hair, you notice, but near the root it is black, and our calliper-gauge shows us that the black portion is fourteen sixty-fourths of an inch long. Now, in this envelope are some hairs that I removed from the dead woman's head. They also are golden hairs, black at the roots, and when I measure the black portion I find it to be fourteen sixty-fourths of an inch long. Then, finally, there is this."

He turned the horn over, and pointed to a small patch of dried blood. Embedded in it was a blue sequin.

Mr. Stopford and the butcher both gazed at the horn in silent amazement; then the former drew a deep breath and looked up at Thorndyke.

"No doubt," said he, "you can explain this mystery, but for my part I am utterly bewildered, though you are filling me with hope."

"And yet the matter is quite simple," returned Thorndyke, "even with these few facts before us, which are only a selection from the body of evidence in our possession. But I will state my theory, and you shall judge." He rapidly sketched a rough plan on a sheet of paper, and continued: "These were the conditions when the train was approaching Woldhurst: Here was the passenger-coach, here was the burning rick, and here was a cattle-truck. This steer was in that truck. Now my hypothesis is that at that time Miss Grant was standing with her head out of the off-side window, watching the burning rick. Her wide hat, worn on the left side, hid from her view the cattle-truck which she was approaching, and then this is what happened." He sketched another plan to a larger scale. "One of the steers—this one—had thrust its long horn out through the bars. The point of that horn struck the deceased's head, driving her face violently against the corner of the window, and then, in disengaging, ploughed its way through the scalp, and suffered a fracture of its core from the violence of the wrench. This hypothesis is inherently probable, it fits all the facts, and those facts admit of no other explanation."

The solicitor sat for a moment as though dazed; then he rose impulsively and seized Thorndyke's hands. "I don't know what to

say to you," he exclaimed huskily, "except that you have saved my brother's life, and for that may God reward you!"

The butcher rose from his chair with a slow grin.

"It seems to me," said he, "as if that ox-gall was what you might call a blind, eh, sir?"

And Thorndyke smiled an inscrutable smile.

When we returned to town on the following day we were a party of four, which included Mr. Harold Stopford. The verdict of "Death by misadventure," promptly returned by the coroner's jury, had been shortly followed by his release from custody, and he now sat with his brother and me, listening with rapt attention to Thorndyke's analysis of the case.

"So, you see," the latter concluded, "I had six possible theories of the cause of death worked out before I reached Halbury, and it only remained to select the one that fitted the facts. And when I had seen the cattle-truck, had picked up that sequin, had heard the description of the steers, and had seen the hat and the wounds, there was nothing left to do but the filling in of details."

"And you never doubted my innocence?" asked Harold Stopford.

Thorndyke smiled at his quondam client.

"Not after I had seen your colour-box and your sketch," said he, "to say nothing of the spike." *Q*

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

The last resting place of the body was a mere indentation in the forest floor, in appearance as peaceful as the hollow left by a sleeping fawn.

—Kathy Lynn Emerson

From "Death by Devil's Turnips" (AHMM, December 2003)

devilsturnipqwxxyzabcfghjkm
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNPOQRSTUVWXYZ

THE STORY THAT WON

The April Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Chris Laing of Kingston, Ontario, Canada. Honorable mentions go to Cheryl T. Millhouse of Brooklyn, New York; Randall A. Martin of Topeka, Kansas; Alaina Brokaw of Preston, Connecticut; LuAnn Bishop of West Haven, Connecticut; Tiffany Plunkett of Los Feliz, California; K. J. Zimring of Decatur, Georgia; and Adrian Ludens of Rapid City, South Dakota.

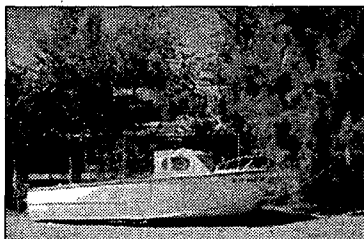


Photo by Myrna J. Yancy

DRY RUN

CHRIS LAING

Benny popped open his peepers and searched for the alarm clock. Lordy, six A.M. Through his fog, he groped for the jangling phone and mumbled something.

"That you, Benny? Speak up."

"It's me, boss."

"I gave you one job yesterday, right? One job. You remember?"

Benny struggled awake, flung his feet onto the floor and knuckled his eyes. The boss sounded mad and that wasn't good. "Yeah, the job. 'Course I remember. I hadda have the boat at your place first thing this morning. So I did it last night."

He heard the boss release a mournful sigh. "Benny, listen to me." He spoke as though Benny was just a kid, sounding like Sister Theresa when she'd caught him red-handed at St. Mary's prying open the poor box with a crucifix. "I told you Maxie would deliver the gun shipment at first light, right? Then we'd scout the route over to Smuggler's Island before meeting the buyers, to make sure there were no surprises, right?"

"Sure, boss. That's right."

"So what went wrong?"

"Nuthin' went wrong, boss. Jeez, it went slick. You told me to swipe a small cruiser, maybe a twenty-footer or so, and stash it in front of your place. Lucky I found one on its trailer so I could unload it right on the sand."

The boss was shouting now. "But why *there*? We were gonna use it!"

"Yeah. For a dry run, you said. Those were your exact words, boss, and that's exactly what I done!"

THE LINEUP

TERENCE FAHERTY, a former technical writer and pilot, has won the Shamus and Macavity awards for his short fictions and been nominated for the Edgar, the Anthony, and the Derringer. He is the creator of the Owen Keane and Scott Elliott series. He lives in Indianapolis, Indiana, with his wife, Jan.



DAVID EDGERLEY GATES grew up in New England and now lives in Santa Fe. His short fiction has appeared in AHMM, *A Matter of Crime*, *Story*, and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, and anthologized in *Best American Stories* and *World's Finest Mystery and Crime*. He has been nominated for both the Shamus and Edgar awards. His forthcoming novel is titled *Black Traffic*.

Booked & Printed columnist **ROBERT C. HAHN** reviews mysteries for *Publishers Weekly* and *New York Post*, among other places, and is the former mystery columnist for the *Cincinnati Post*.

ROBERT S. LEVINSON's latest novel is *In the Key of Death*, published in March by Five Star. His AHMM short story from last year is the title piece of the new anthology, *A Prisoner of Memory and 24 of the Year's Finest Crime and Mystery Stories*. His play, *Murder Times Two*, premiered in June at the International Mystery Writers Festival at RiverPark Center in Owensboro, Kentucky.

Author of the Herbie Sawyer series of stories set on Cape Cod in Massachusetts, **D. A. MCGUIRE** is a science teacher and writer from Bridgewater, Massachusetts. "Catch Your Death" is her twenty-second story for AHMM.

J. RENTILLY is a Los Angeles-based journalist who covers film, music, and literature for a variety of national and international publications.

DARRELL SCHWEITZER is the author of the novels *The Mask of the Sorcerer*, *The Shattered Goddess*, and *Refugees from an Imaginary Country*, as well as hundreds of short stories, mostly in the fantasy and science fiction field.

ALFRED MYSTERY MAGAZINE HITCHCOCK

Linda Landrigan
EDITOR

Laurel Fantauzzo
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Susan Kendrioski
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
ART AND PRODUCTION

Carole Dixon
SENIOR PRODUCTION MANAGER

Evira Matos
PRODUCTION ASSOCIATE

Victoria Green
SENIOR ART DIRECTOR

Irene Lee
PRODUCTION ARTIST/GRAPHIC DESIGNER

Abigail Browning
MANAGER, SUBSIDIARY RIGHTS
AND MARKETING

Bruce W. Sherbow
VICE PRESIDENT,
SALES AND MARKETING

Sandy Marlowe
CIRCULATION SERVICES

Julia McEvoy
MANAGER, ADVERTISING SALES

Connie Goon
ADVERTISING SALES COORDINATOR

Peter Kanter
PUBLISHER

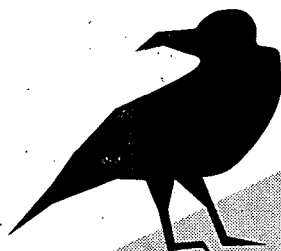
www.TheMysteryPlace.com

COMING IN
NOVEMBER 2008

Sob Sister
Loren D. Estleman

Discovery
Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Killing Time
Jane K. Cleland



DIRECTORY OF SERVICES

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Editorial Offices

475 Park Avenue South
New York, NY 10016

Subscription Services

(800) 220-7443
www.themysteryplace.com

Change of Address & Subscription Inquiries

www.themysteryplace.com
Or send your current mailing label
and new address to:

AHMM

6 Prowitt Street
Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

Address problems to
Sandy Marlowe at
smarlowe@pennypublications.com

Back Issues

Send check for \$5.00 per issue
(*\$7.00 per issue outside the U.S.*) to:
AHMM

6 Prowitt Street, Suite 100
Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

*Please specify which issue
you are ordering.*

Subrights & Permissions

licensing@pennypublications.com
Or fax inquiries to (212) 686-7414

Newsstand Sales

Dell Magazines, Department NS

6 Prowitt Street
Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

(203) 866-6688
newsstand@pennypublications.com

Advertising Representative

Connie Goon, Advertising Sales Coordinator
475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016
Tel: (212) 686-7188 ■ Fax: (212) 686-7414
adsales@dellmagazines.com
(Display & Classified Advertising)

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE (ISSN:0002-5224), Vol. 53, No. 10, October 2008. Published monthly except for combined January/February and July/August double issues by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. Annual subscription \$55.90 in the U.S.A. and possessions, \$65.90 elsewhere, payable in advance in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Subscription orders and correspondence regarding subscriptions should be sent to 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Or, to subscribe, call 1-800-220-7443. Editorial Offices: 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. Executive Offices: 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Montreal, Quebec, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 40012460. © 2008 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. Dell is a trademark registered in the U.S. Patent Office. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Reproduction or use, in any manner, of editorial or pictorial content without express written permission is prohibited. All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated by name or character. Submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts or artwork. POSTMASTER: Send changes to *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. In Canada return to: Quebecor St. Jean, 800 Blvd. Industrial, St. Jean, Quebec J3B 8G4. GST #R123054108.

Printed in Canada

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

Alfred Hitchcock October 2008

Advertise to the world's largest mystery magazine audience with our Alfred Hitchcock/Ellery Queen combined classified section. Ad rates per issue: \$4.95 per word (10 word minimum), \$350 per column inch (2.25 inch maximum). Special introductory offer: Buy two ads and receive a third ad FREE. Send orders to: Dell Magazines, Classified Department, 475 Park Ave. S., 11th Floor, New York, New York 10016. Direct inquiries to: (212) 686-7188; Fax: (212) 686-7414; or email: adsales@dellmagazines.com

AUTHORS

Check: www.barrylongyear.net Enemy Mine. All books in print.

MERCHANDISE

Murder Mystery Theme Party Game Kits for 4-400 Guests! www.dinnerandamurder.com

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

Free download of complete *Pharmacology Is Murder* at www.dirk-wyle.com/download.htm

Marlowe's Mysteries. Mystery books and more, for the collector and reader. www.marlowesmysteries.com.

INTEREST TO ALL

The Foolscap Society Practicing the Art of Deduction. Qualifying puzzler and membership information, \$10 US to: PO Box 44, Nallen, WV 26680. foolscapsociety@gmail.com

Are You Moving?



Please direct all change of address or other subscription inquiries to AHMM, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. For change of address, please advise six to eight weeks before moving. Please send us your current mailing label and new address, or visit us online at www.themysteryplace.com/custsvc/

Saving Money is no mystery!

Get **4** back issues for just \$5.95!

*That's 65% off
the regular price!*

Expand your imagination
with 4 favorite issues of
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine at a fraction
of their original price!

To get your value pack, fill out
the coupon below and mail it to
us with your payment today.

DELL MAGAZINES

Suite SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

☒ **YES!** Please send me **Name:** _____
my Ellery Queen's Mystery (Please print)
Magazine Value Pack. I get 4 **Address:** _____
back issues for just \$5.95 plus \$2 **City:** _____
shipping and handling (\$7.95 per **State:** _____ **ZIP:** _____
pack, U.S. funds). My payment of \$_____ is enclosed. (EQPK04)

Please make checks payable to Dell Magazines Direct. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Offer expires 9/30/09.

28C-NHQVL3

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TheMysteryPlace.com



Visit www.TheMysteryPlace.com, home of the world's leading short-fiction mystery magazines.

Log on and enjoy:

- Excerpts of current stories from the genre's leading authors
- Readers' Forum
- Awards lists
- Book reviews
- Mystery puzzles

All this and much more!

ALFRED MYSTERY MAGAZINE
HITCHCOCK

ELLERY QUEEN
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Visit us at www.themysteryplace.com